

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

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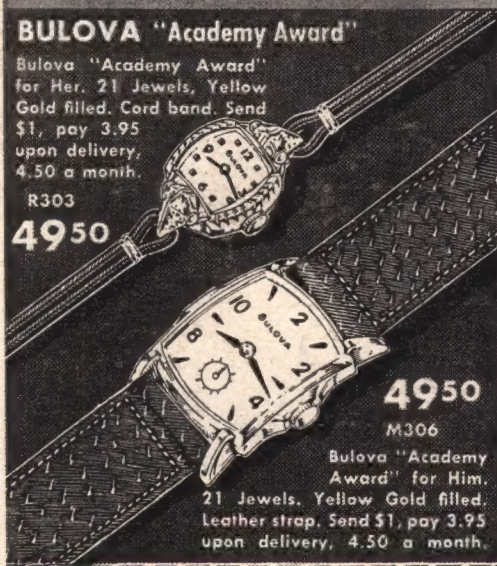
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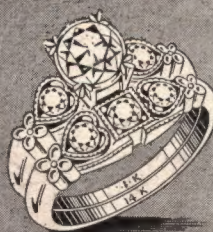
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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

NEXT ISSUE
PUBLISHED
NOVEMBER 3RD



VOLUME 43

NOVEMBER, 1950

NUMBER 4

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Any resemblance between any character appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

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PIRATE PUNCHERS

By **HAROLD HELFER**

Over the waves sailed the sea-faring cowpokes—down into the horizon of history.

Buccaneers were once as respectable as cowboys. In fact, that's what they were. The men whose blood-curdling deeds caused many a timber to shiver were the New World's first cowhands. In those days—in the 17th century—Spain was top dog and she ran things pretty much to suit herself. She frowned on anybody who wasn't of Spanish blood coming to America and she chased English and French New World settlers into the Caribbean area.

A group of these men went onto San Domingo Island. The place was infested with wild cattle and the men employed their time chasing them down.

Soon San Domingo became a sort of headquarters for the sea-farers in that neighborhood. The men who had been shunted by Spain cured the flesh of the cattle by smoke and sold the barbecued meat to the mariners who came along.

The place where the fire was built to cure the beef was called "boucan" in the Caribee tongue and that is how the buccaneers got their name.

So prosperous and thriving did these original cowboys become that Spain found itself increasingly annoyed by them. Knowing that these men could lose themselves in the vastness of their tropical surroundings, she decided to ruin them by exterminating the cattle on the island.

But the Caribbean cowhands decided

(Please continue on page 8)



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(Continued from page 6)

they would retaliate. They began sailing out with their rickety ships and attacking Spanish vessels.

They became bolder and bolder. Once a ship of buccaneers found itself cornered by two huge Spanish galleons, each with 60 cannons and 1500 men aboard.

It appeared to be suicide for the freebooters to do anything but surrender. But Lourent, the leader of the buccaneers, gave his men a pep talk. He said it was against their principles to surrender.

And so, with impudent bravado, the men guided their ship right between the two great Spanish vessels and routed the astonished Spaniards. Spain felt so disgraced by this that she put to death the commander of the Spanish ships for humiliating his country.

But deeds like this made the buccaneers even more intrepid and ferocious—they even took to raiding coastal American towns—and they became an even greater thorn in the side of the Spanish empire. The Spaniards came to fear them so that many times they surrendered their ships to them without even putting up token resistance.

The buccaneers had other principles besides that of not surrendering.

Each man was honor-bound to turn in any loot he might have come by personally into the general treasury for dividing. This observation was virtually never violated.

The men were for the most part religious by nature and almost all enterprises were begun with a prayer.

But the men led a gay reckless life—their cattle-punching was all but forgotten—and it was their dissipation plus the toll of tropical climate on men used to more temperate zones plus the fact that they began to attack vessels indiscriminately, picking on ships of all nations, that led to their eventual extinction.

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Next

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

issue

Published

November 3rd

Howdy, Folks . . . "Death Guns in Broken Bow" by William Heuman is our action-packed lead novel for next month. It's the story of Steve McVane, an undercover Pinkerton man, who was assigned to track down a gunslinging train robber—and was forced to pit his wits against the cunning of an owlhoot law-dog and his ruthless deputies.



In order to ride into Broken Bow in disguise, Steve McVane hired his gun to Kent Allman, part-owner of the Bar A, who, since his uncle was bushwhacked, knew he needed protection from an unseen killer.



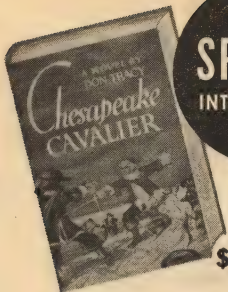
Broken Bow silently accused Steve of old Allman's murder, and when a neighboring cow-puncher tried to get him to draw his gun, Steve shed his .44, and with fists flying, beat down the proddy puncher.



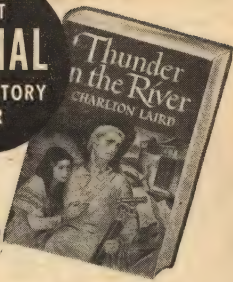
Steve knew that shyster Hudson was electing himself to a fresh mound in boothill when he exposed a forged will, a deadly drygulch plot, and a desperate confession. Suddenly a bullet smashed through the office window.



Running out to the vacant lot from which the bushwhack bullet was fired, Steve became a gun-fire target in a hunt-and-kill game with a con-ning enemy. The complete story will appear in the December issue.



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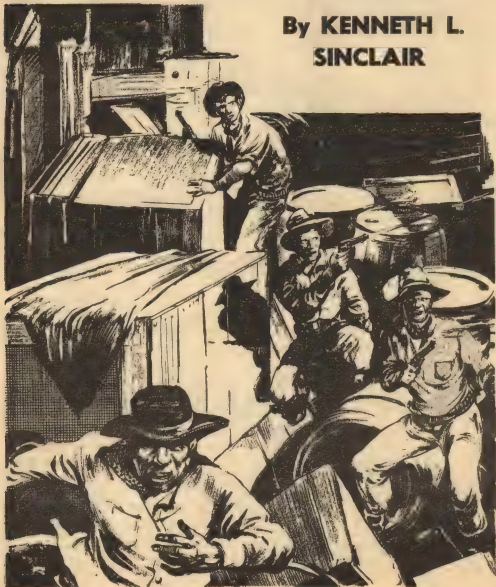
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GUNSMOKE PASSAGE TO HELL'S CANYON

• • •

Rancher Hugh Wilbur had to turn outlaw before he could return bushwhack bullets to the treacherous Broad Arrow—and its gun-backed foreman.

By **KENNETH L.
SINCLAIR**



Blazing Frontier
Novel



His shot triggered a roar of guns.

CHAPTER

Deadly Vengeance

1

The morning sun slanted down over the rimrock and struck the man who lay sprawled on the knoll, warming him. He stirred, lifted his head, and winced with the pain that the movement brought. He came slowly to his knees, then reared to his feet and stood swaying there, blinking and trying to swallow.

Hugh Wilbur was twenty-three—but last night had done something to him besides physical damage. His eyes, as he turned to look down at the burned and blackened ruin that had been his ranch, were suddenly aged by despair.

They'd hit him sometime after midnight. They'd yanked him from the bunk into which he'd fallen fully clothed and exhausted after a day's work on the log house that he was trying to finish before winter. They'd beaten him so that he'd been aware of them only as bulking, hard-breathing shadows in the dark. Then the jolting blows had plunged him into half-consciousness—into the black depths. Then they fired his ranch.

His hand dropped to his side, seeking the familiar feel of his gun—then he grinned ruefully and let the hand sag. They'd taken the weapon from him, of course. And this was their answer, to all the little ranchmen in the canyon. This was what happened when somebody stampeded a bunch of Broad Arrow's own stock through its sharp and shining wire.

Hugh Wilbur's head reared and his lips formed a humorless laugh. It was a wry joke that Broad Arrow had been wrong—he was not the man who had stampeded that herd.

But now in his bitterness he wanted to congratulate the man who had. He was not sure, but he thought that Fritz Stoltz was the one. It was Fritz who had talked of hitting back at the Arrow. Anyway, Fritz's outfit was nearest of the little spreads, and a beaten man feels need of communion with his own kind. Hugh lurched into a painful walk, heading that way.

The spang of a rifle bullet stopped him—the slug struck the earth three feet in front of him, throwing up a spurt of dust. And then the sound of the rifle came to his ears.

The rifle was atop a knoll to the right,

perhaps a quarter of a mile away. Hugh Wilbur had no cover here, and no will within his battered body to make a useless run for it. He waited dully for the shot that would finish him.

But none came. Time ran past him like the silent current of a river, and the tension of his waiting pulled his lips thin. But no shot came.

Hugh took another step. And the spang of the rifle bullet was prompt. Dirt erupted scarcely a foot in front of him.

All right, he thought. They didn't want him to go to Fritz's place. Anger stirred within him, arousing some of his stubborn will. He'd turn if they wanted it that way—but he'd go straight to the Arrow itself!

He'd call old Dan Upton for what he was, a man of greed, a sure-thing gambler who brought in a bunch of hard-cases to run everyone else out and away from this rich river range that Upton coveted for his own. Hugh Wilbur was finished here, but in his bitterness he wanted to have his say. And he wanted to see the look that would come to Madge Upton's lovely face when she heard the truth.

He turned toward the Arrow, but he had taken only a few steps when a rifle on another knoll spoke its warning and a spurt of dust blocked his way.

He stopped again, and swung uncertainly. The only way left for him to go—short of turning directly toward one or the other of those rifles—was toward MacInnon's Landing. And the Landing was the one way out of this Hidden Bend country.

And suddenly he knew that this was what they wanted. They were herding him toward the Landing. For some reason that he could not fathom they had let him live, and he could only do as they wished . . . for now. Deep inside him there was a swiftly-forming resolve to bide his time, to gather whatever weap-

ons he could lay his hands on, and hit them back.

They were behind him still, when at last he lurched down—the single rutted street of MacInnon's Landing. He'd had only a few glimpses of them—two mounted men who followed tenaciously as hunters and kept just within rifle range—but he knew without a doubt that they were there.

And he'd find scant haven here. There were only a couple of houses, a blacksmith shop, and the long building that perched on the river's bank and served Alec MacInnon as combined wharf, store, and saloon. Everything was new, everything was built of rough-sawed lumber and peeled poles. It had been only a year since Alec dared the currents of Hell's Canyon with his little steamboat and won, thereby opening up this rich and vast rangeland of the Hidden Bend country.

THERE was a buckboard rig at Alec's hitchrail. And Madge Upton came out of the store, with bundles in her arms and the morning sunlight full upon her. It struck little highlights in the auburn hair that was drawn close to her head and secured in a ribbon at the back of her neck. Slim in her man-style outfit of shirt and levis, she moved with a purposeful stride.

She looked at Hugh Wilbur, there on the steps, and she came to an abrupt stop. Her lips parted with the shock of what she saw.

"Hugh!" she cried, dropping the bundles and hurrying to him. "Hugh, what's happened? You—you've been beaten!"

"Yes," he said to her. "You can tell your dad that his hardcase hombres made a good job of it. But they made a mistake—they should have killed me while they were at it!"

She recoiled a little, her lovely eyes

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widening as they measured the depth of the bitterness that was in him. "Hugh, you're wrong. You must be wrong. Dad wouldn't—the Broad Arrow wouldn't—" She faltered, suddenly unsure of herself and of the truth of her own words.

He told her what had happened, then. In a voice flat with weariness he gave her every harsh detail of it. "They burned me out," he finished. "They shot my horses, they dynamited my well, they burned me out."

He didn't tell her that this was the end of their dream. He didn't need to. She was as much a part of it as the rich grassland that had been his claim. She'd been with him the day they raced across that grass, their heads high and laughter on their lips. She had fled from him, her eyes alight with happiness, until he'd caught her for the kiss that put magic between them. She'd seen him fit the logs for the walls of the house that was to be theirs, she'd watched with tenderness in her eyes as he set stones into the fireplace.

She knew. And now it was all done and finished.

"Hugh," she said suddenly, gripping his arms with the intensity of her pleading, "leave the Bend! Please—for me, Hugh. Go somewhere else and get another start. Then I'll come to you. Anywhere!"

His lean, battered head lifted. "No. An hour ago I'd have put my tail between my legs like you ask. But I've been herded like a coyote—"

"If it was Dad's men who did that thing last night, Hugh, they'll do it again. Dad has changed, since we came here. He's harsh and stubborn. And Ed Souders says that you stampeded one of our herds—"

"Ed Souders," Hugh said flatly, "is a liar and a gunman. Your dad bringin' him in as foreman is one of the things that has put folks to wondering, on this range. There never was any trouble here until

the Arrow came. We all were little fellows together, working to get the first real start that most of us had had in our lives, all of us lending the other fellow a hand when he needed it. Then the Arrow started grabbing range and stringing wire—with Ed Souders' gun to back the play."

"Then—then you didn't run those cattle, Hugh?"

He looked down into her eyes, and pain pulled at his throat. She was near and he yearned to take her in his arms. But the time for that was behind him now.

"Madge, I ran no cattle of the Arrow's. But from now on I'll hit your dad any way I can!"

"Hugh! You know what this does to me—what it will do to us. Please, Hugh, leave now!"

"I'd stack up about as high as a jack-rabbit if I did that. You know I love you—but I got to stand on my two feet as a man to be worthy of you."

Then, to quell the pain that was in him, he swung away from her and stalked into MacInnon's place.

The store occupied one side of the long, roughly-finished room. A pine-board bar ranged along the opposite wall. A big and restless man with a black Stetson pulled low over his eyes stood at the far end of the bar, drinking silently in the shadows. Alec MacInnon was polishing glasses—little and quick and dry-looking, he turned to face Hugh Wilbur.

"Whiskey, Alec," Hugh said.

The Scotsman placed bottle and glass on the bar, his shrewd eyes making a quick survey of Hugh's bruises and the clots of dried blood. He said, "A drink you'll get. But you'll not set foot on the deck of my boat for any trip downriver."

Hugh stared sharply at the little trader. "I hadn't asked, Alec. What made you think that I would?"

The trader lifted a rag to the bar and polished with short and energetic strokes,

his freckled bald head bobbing in time to the movement. "I've eyes in my head, man. 'Tis said you stampeded a Broad Arrow herd of cattle. Last night, riders were out and about on this range—I heard them. Today you come here with the look of one who's had a cliff fall on him. You've never been a drinking man, so you're here to lick your wounds and ask passage. The loser, seeking his way out."

"And you'd not take me if I asked. Why?"

"Because you're not finished, lad. You're young and you've had a licking—the bitterness of it is new to you and you think you're through. But there's a tough core inside you that'll not be licked. Now recall that day down in Lewiston, when you came to me and said you'd heard of Hidden Bend and wanted to locate here. You'll remember that there were others, many of them, clamoring for places. I chose you, Stolz, Blackie Farr and only a few of the rest. My head was in the clouds that day, but I measured you. I'd found a range untouched by man, and I wanted to see an empire built here. I chose the ones who had it in them to build, and to face up to the hard pioneering of it. In your case at least, I chose well."

Hugh downed his drink and found the raw burn of it in key with his mood. "Then," he said, "you brought in the Broad Arrow outfit."

Alec's face clouded. But before he could reply the big hombre from the end of the bar ranged up beside Hugh Wilbur and helped himself to the bottle. Alec snapped, "Keep out of this, Elba. The lad's not of your stamp."

THE big man thumbed his hat back from a long, bony face and regarded the trader with a sort of darkly placid humor. "Scotty," he said, "you jabber like a chipmunk." Then he turned to

Hugh. "Name's Lang Elba. Seems like you an' me are in the same boat, only we ain't got a boat nor an oar to shove it with. Ed Souders' bunch gave me my notice today—but in my case they were a mite more gentle than with you. All they done was drop a loop on me, pull me off my horse, an' tell me that if they caught me on this range again they'd hang me."

"I told you, Elba," Alec MacInnon snapped, "that I'd take you downriver on the next trip."

"Maybe," Elba said without taking his eyes from Hugh's face. "Seems kind of partial—you'd take me, an' not the young fella here. He's prob'ly more deservin' than I am, yet you turn 'im down flat before he opens his mouth to ask."

"You're no asset to this range!" the trader snapped. "An outlaw on the dodge—you only got here by stowing away on my boat. I'd let you stay here to hang, but I want no violence in Hidden Bend."

"Want it or not, it seems like you've got it," Elba drawled. "A minute ago you hankered for this young hombre to fight back. Now, I've got a hideout in a pocket up there in the cliffs. It ain't much, but it'll do. Room for two of us, I reckon."

"All right," Hugh Wilbur said quickly. "But I've got no horse—"

"Neither have I," Elba said, dark glints of humor in his eyes again, "but that can be remedied." He glanced down at Hugh's empty holster. "I see they got your gun, too. Scotty, we'll need an iron apiece, an' a couple boxes of shells to fit 'em. About the usual bait of beans an' such—no, better double the amount."

Alec MacInnon glared briefly at Hugh, his lips taut with disapproval of this. But what he saw in Hugh's battered young face put restraint into him, and he shrugged and set about getting the order together.

While the trader placed two new guns on the counter and stuffed groceries into

a sack, Lang Elba moved silently to the window that faced the street. In spite of his size the man had a catlike liteness in him; and when the light fell full upon his face it accented the harsh and saturnine lines of it.

When he came back to the counter he put a hand to Hugh's shoulder. "We're in luck, kid. Couple of Broad Arrow horses out there in front of the blacksmith shop. Waitin' to be shod, likely." His wide and mobile mouth pulled into a grin, and his glance probed deep into the younger man's face in a way that carried a deliberate, unspoken challenge.

Hugh straightened a little without realizing that he did so, and nodded.

"A pretext," snapped Alec MacInnon, totaling the bill with an angry stroke of his pencil and shoving it forward on the counter. "The men who rode those horses are here to see that you don't leave the Landing until the *River Queen* does."

"Then it'll jolt 'em some, to find they've given us mounts." Elba picked up the bill and looked at it. "I'll pay this some day, Scotty. Always wanted to run a bill like a substantial citizen. When I was a kid up in Alberta it was always the high point of the year when the beef money was in an' the old man took me with him to town when he paid his bill. The storeman always gave me a sack of candy—"

"You'll pay cash here," MacInnon snapped.

Elba threw back his head and laughed. "The canny little chipmunk thinks little of our chances, kid!" He took out a roll of bills, peeled off two of them and dropped them to the counter. Then he picked up one of the guns, thumbed open the loading gate and pushed shells into the cylinder.

Hugh Wilbur took the other weapon and loaded it. MacInnon watched that for a moment and then made a gesture of resignation.

"All right," the trader said. "I'll not

see you killed, lad. I wanted you to stand for your rights, but I didn't mean this. I'll take you downriver."

Hugh lifted his head to look straight at the trader. His was the feeling of a man setting foot on a new trail; the decision of it was behind him now, and the fact sent a current of sureness flowing through him. "The Arrow was wrong about me stampeding their stock," he said. "But they didn't stop to ask. They hit me hard, and I'll hit them back."

Then he was turning to match Lang Elba's unhurried stride toward the door.

On a quick impulse, though, Hugh leaped over the counter, found his zone among the hats piled on a shelf, and fitted the Stetson to a jaunty angle on his head.

He gave MacInnon a hard grin over his shoulder, then he jumped back across the counter. Elba's deep-set eyes swung briefly to him, measuring him with a flicker of dark humor in their depths.

Then they were outside, their boots thudding dully on the new planks of MacInnon's porch.

The Broad Arrow buckboard was gone from the street. The two Arrow saddlers stood at the open front of the blacksmith shop, slack-hipped and lazily tail-switching the flies brought by the morning's heat. The smith came out and knelt to lift the fore-hoof of one of the horses and grip it between leather-aproned knees.

Lang Elba's long stride carried him toward the man. "Back, friend," he snapped. "Back inside."

The blacksmith's head came up, and he blinked, comprehension slow in coming to him. Then he straightened and fell back. "But you can't—" he began, and glanced sidewise into the shadows of his shop.

Lang Elba's eyes followed that glance, his head suddenly high and as quick in movement as that of an alerted wild animal.

There was movement in the shadows behind the forge. There was a whisper

of leather against metal, the click of a gun hammer drawn back to full cock, the gusty breath of a man.

Elba's gun seemed to come like magic to his hand, to lift and to fall in a deliberate arc. It bucked against his muscles and kicked high—and in the roar and the smoke of it there was a mocking smile on the outlaw's face.

The man inside the shop pitched forward, twisting, into the light. Then he was down, kicking out the last brief moment of his life on the earth floor.

Elba's head swung to put a searching regard against Hugh's face. "You got to remember, kid," he said in a voice as flat and emotionless as unrippled water, "he may have been the one that beat you."

Hugh lifted his gaze from the dead man. "We'd better ride," he said.

They mounted up. Elba slapped the saddle-scabbard of his mount and found a rifle there. Then he glanced toward the scabbard at Hugh's thigh and saw that it was empty.

"Careful," he warned. "One of 'em's posted some'ers near."

They rode out of the Landing at a jog-trot. Lang Elba seemed to tower in his saddle, turning his head to peer this way and that with eyes that were coldly alert under the black brim of his hat.

But it was Hugh who spotted the Broad Arrow man. He was on the roof of a little shed by the river bank; he'd heard the shooting of course, and he'd hurried to get into a position from which he could fire into the street. Now he was throwing himself prone, levering a shell into the chamber of his rifle....

Hugh threw a shot so close to the man that it kicked splinters of shingles into his face. The man gave a sharp cry—because of the way the impact of the lead into the thin roof structure was transmitted to his body, he must have thought he was hit—and rolled over, clawing at his eyes. The rifle which had slipped

from his hands fell end over end to the ground.

Lang Elba laughed softly. "You should have killed that one, kid. There's only two of us, an' a dozen of them Broad Arrow hombres. An' this'll stir 'em up like hornets. One of 'em dead, an' we got their horses—Ed Souders'll take the hide off that hombre of yours in little pieces for this!"

CHAPTER 2 *A Foreman's Inferno*

Lang Elba's hideout was a cave, high in a bend of the cliffs and reached by a narrow, dangerous foot-trail. He had built a rude loose-rock fireplace beside which stood the blackened tin cans in which he cooked his food. There was a single bunk, made of split poles and covered with several inches of cedar boughs for a mattress. And there was little else.

"Better take the bunk, kid," Elba said. "You'll need to rest a few days, stove-up like you are."

Hugh protested, but stretched out on the bunk for a brief rest. Weariness, held back until now by the fences of his will, flooded over him, and he slept.

When he awoke it was night. The chill of it had reached deep inside him and added to the stiffness that was the result of the beating he'd taken. He found that he could hardly move, but he forced himself to rise.

The stars were shining outside the cave. Lang Elba's big, still figure sat on the ledge at the entrance, only the glow of his cigarette and the slow drift of smoke from his nostrils betraying the fact that he was awake.

"Some grub's in the cans, there," Elba said, without turning his head. "Prob'ly warm yet, from the heat in the rocks."

Hugh ate, fumbling in the dark until his eyes became more accustomed to it,

and found that he was ravenous. When the cans were empty he built a smoke and went out onto the ledge.

"I'm wondering, Lang," he said bluntly. "Where do you fit into this? You could have left on MacInnon's boat, yet you came back—"

Elba's big body did not stir. "Scotty told you. I'm on the dodge. Maybe I'd just as leave hang here as elsewhere. It's a pretty place...."

"It won't do," Hugh said. "I saw your face when you mentioned Ed Souders' name."

"Sharp one, are you? Well, say there were three young bucks who picked off a mine payroll for themselves, down in Arizona. Say they made it a clean job, everything neat an' nobody hurt. Then while they was puttin' some miles behind 'em, one of the three cut loose without any warnin' an' shot the horses from under the other two. He was carryin' the money an' he took out with it for himself alone, leavin' his pards afoot.

"Ed Souders wasn't what he was callin' himself then. But he left us in the desert for the law to catch up with us. Which the law did. The hombre that was with me lost his head an' started shootin' an' was killed on the spot. You put me in mind of him, kid, the minute I seen you walk into Scotty's place— Well, I been a while on Souders' trail. Now I been watchin', tryin' to figure out what game he's playin' here so I'll know how to hit him where it'll hurt the most."

"You weren't hurting him much today," Hugh said. "Down there at the Landing without a horse or even a gun to your name."

Elba chuckled. "Damn you, kid, I like that nerve you got in you. I was caught like a fool today, on my way to the Landin' for a bait of grub. It's a mistake I'll not make again—but the way those hombres handled me has put me to wonderin' all the more about Ed Souders.

I told 'em to trot out their big he-wolf, but all they done was grin at me—Souders wouldn't dirty his hands on me, they said. How in hell does he stack up so tall here, anyhow?"

"He's foreman of the Broad Arrow," Hugh said.

"I know that—where's the magic in it? Broad Arrow's just another cow-outfit. It's got mighty good range here, range that'll make its owner a wealthy man in the long pull. But what's there in it for Ed Souders?"

"I don't know that," Hugh said. "In the beginning, we were all little fish, agreed that the Bend should always be open range. We filed on claims tucked away in the bends and coves of this rim-rock, places where there were creeks and trees and shelter against winter storms. Dan Upton came last of all, and he filed on land right out there in the middle of the range."

"Hundred an' sixty acres," Elba said. "But I see his wire stretchin' for miles in each direction!"

"Yes. He had every man in his outfit file on a homestead, and he threw them all together and stretched his wire."

Elba's laugh was low and resonant in the dark. "Not a new trick, among law-abiding thieves. That's the Broad Arrow's light out there, ain't it?"

Hugh nodded silently. That light would be falling warm and full on Madge Upton's lovely face; and he was up here, perched on this aerie in the dark.

Madge Upton was standing tensely, there in the living room of the Broad Arrow house.

"Dad," she said.

Old Dan Upton had come in late from the range, and had eaten his supper in silence. His grizzled head lifted, the lamp-light falling upon the lines and shadows of worry in his face. He'd been with his crew when they disposed of the carcasses of the steers that had been trampled in

the stampede. He brightened now, with an effort. He said, "Madge, you're lovely tonight. I wish your mother could have lived to see—"

He had missed the spots of angry color in her cheeks. "Dad," she interrupted, "you've done a terrible thing. You sent the men to burn out Hugh Wilbur's ranch. They beat him!"

"It had to be, daughter. These little outfits have got to learn that the Arrow will protect itself. The law is far away and isn't much interested as yet because this Bend country is new and the only way in here is a ride up that wild river on MacInnon's boat. We've got to teach the little outfits ourselves. I know this hits you hard, Madge—I know that young fellow was sweet on you, and I know you liked him. But he's proved that he has outlaw in him, and he's not the man for you."

"But Dad, Hugh Wilbur didn't stam-

pede that herd! I know that he didn't!"

UPTON'S thin body straightened. Some of the weariness that lay like a weight upon him seemed to fall aside under the jolt of her statement. But then he shook his head and smiled wryly.

"What girlish notion is this, Madge?"

"But he didn't, Dad—I know he didn't!"

"How do you know that?"

"He told me. And Dad, Hugh wouldn't lie to me."

"Girl, the man who won't lie hasn't got breath in his body. I've learned that lesson, if none other. But, my dear, Wilbur did stampede our stock. Ed Souders says he found definite sign—"

"I don't care what Ed Souders says! You nearly killed the wrong man! And even if he had been the one you had no right to do that to him."

Pain tugged at the lines of Dan Upton's



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face. He tried awkwardly to pat Madge's hand, but she snatched it away from him.

"Daughter," he told her, "you're all upset. This first year is the critical one that will decide whether we make it or not."

Madge felt a wave of compassion for her father. He was stubborn, but he meant well. He'd been a cattle king over in Oregon, with all the broad range from Little Slipper Butte to Wagontire under his brand. He'd never told her exactly what happened, but she knew that after her mother's death he had found release in gambling. Lightly at first—but then it was a fever running in his blood, and then suddenly everything he had owned was gone.

She moistened her lips to speak. But a subtle chill came over her and she realized that Ed Souders was standing silent in the doorway, his eyes watching her.

She caught her breath and turned to face the foreman. "You might have knocked!" she flung at him. "I've told you before—"

Ed Souders only grinned. He was a man stocky in build, with a broad jaw and a square-trimmed moustache. He was about forty, and faced the world with a flatly complacent expression. Lately he'd seemed to enjoy Madge's angry reaction to his persistent invasions of the privacy of the ranchhouse.

Without taking his eyes from Madge he said, "Something you should know, Dan. That Wilbur hombre didn't leave the Bend on MacInnon's tub. He teamed up with an outlaw who's been hiding out somewhere here. They put lead through Ray Graw today, down at the Landing. Ray's dead."

Souders threw the statements at the older man like a series of quick, flat blows. Dan Upton's face whitened with anger. Then he swung his head to look toward Madge.

"Now you see what I meant. You'd better go to your room now—these things are not for you to worry about."

Madge lifted her chin. Her impulse was to stay, to demand the full details of this. But Hugh was at least involved in a killing, and the shock of that fact sickened her. And Ed Souders still was watching her.

Suddenly Madge felt a terrifying, almost hysterical conviction that control of the Arrow was slipping from her father's hands. She fled from the room.

Hugh Wilbur slept through most of the second day after his beating. Toward evening, in order to work some of the stiffness out of his muscles, he went with Lang Elba along the narrow trail to the crevice where Elba got water from a spring.

Sunset was flinging its warm glow against the wall of the cliffs that hemmed in the Bend. Those cliffs formed a semi-circle more than twenty miles across—an unbroken wall, they held back the outside world as effectively as they imprisoned those inside the Bend. Elba ran his eye along them, then peered at Hugh.

"I'm takin' a sashay tonight, kid. Call-in' on Ed Souders, just for the hell of it. You comin' with me?" When Hugh made no immediate answer Elba added, "Remember, when you hit Souders you hit the Arrow."

"All right," Hugh said. This, he told himself, was what he wanted. This was what all of his will had pointed toward, ever since he dragged himself away from his burning ranch in the dark.

"Good," Elba said. "You are acquainted with the layout of things down there at the Arrow?"

Hugh nodded. "I can find my way around."

"Our problem is to pry Souders out of the bunkhouse an' get 'im outside, alone. You got any ideas?"

"He doesn't sleep in the bunkhouse."

He has a little house of his own that he uses for an office, and he sleeps there."

Elba's head lifted. "Pretty fancy, for a ridin' boss! That puts the cards right into our hand, kid. We'll play 'em that way."

AFTER supper they smoked, letting the last light of evening drain from the sky. Elba explained that he did not want to use the trail by daylight because there were places where a man could be seen from below. The fact that the trail was infinitely more dangerous in the dark was something that he seemed to accept as one of the risks of the game.

They started down and Hugh followed Elba along the trail.

They reached the floor of the canyon at last, and moved through the evergreen timber that flanked the creek. Finding the horses that they'd left rope-hobbled the day before, they led the animals to the spot where saddles and bridles were cached. They mounted up, and headed out across the grassland toward the distant lights of the Broad Arrow ranch.

A mile from the ranch buildings they hit the Broad Arrow wire and dismounted to go on afoot. Elba stopped once, to stare at the lights and to question Hugh about the location of the bunkhouse in relation to Souders' office.

"Pretty quiet," he commented when Hugh had explained the lay of the buildings. "Only lights showin' are in the main house there. Too early yet, for all them cowpokes to be in blankets...."

He let the thought trail, and shrugged and went on, moving with the silence of a drifting shadow in spite of his size.

They swung past the house where warm light thrust from the windows and cast fan-shaped areas of radiance on the grass, to the nearby log cabin which Souders used. The cabin was dark. And when they stepped silently onto its porch they found the door locked.

Elba grunted and put his weight against the panel. Wood splintered sharply and the door swung open; then Elba was inside, his gun in hand and his eyes probing the shadowy interior.

"Nobody here," he said softly. "Come on in an' sit down, kid. I've waited a long while—I can do a little more of it."

There was a big desk here, placed angle-wise at the end of the room so that it faced the windows that looked out toward the Uptons' house. Elba seated himself behind it, his gaunt face touched by the faint starlight that came through the windows. Hugh found a straight-backed chair at the end of the desk.

They waited, while time passed them slowly. The lights of the ranchhouse went out, at last. Perhaps an hour after that, the sound of distant gunfire drifted across the range.

Lang Elba stirred. "Our man is busy somewhere," he said.

After another long interval—so long that Hugh was sure it must now be nearly dawn—there were sounds of horses in the yard, and of low-voiced commands. Then the sound of a man's boots coming toward the cabin.

"Ready, kid?" Elba inquired. "Your job is to take the gun off him. And after that, watch him. Watch him close—he's tricky, an' that kind never does change."

Souders reached the door, and gave a low-voiced exclamation when it swung open to his touch. Then his blocky body was motionless in the doorway as he saw the glint of starlight on the gun in Lang Elba's hand.

"Just come on in," Elba said. "Come in, Ed—I guess that's the name you're usin' now, so we'll make it do."

Souders remained stubbornly motionless, staring across the desk. "Lang," he exclaimed.

Hugh Wilbur sprang forward then. He had the feeling that Souders was easing back onto his heels, getting himself solidly

set to make a stab for his gun. And he grabbed the stocky foreman and spun him around and wrenched the gun from his holster.

Souders swore and fought back, his fist grazing Hugh's cheek. And a dark gladness welled up within Hugh Wilbur as he put all the vigor in his lean body against his opponent, bringing Souders' own gun down against the man's temple, then flinging him into the room where he struck the straight-backed chair and overturned it with a crash.

There was feeling within Hugh Wilbur now. Souders had commanded the crew who had beaten him and burned him out, and now the man was within reach and the fact triggered a rising fury in Hugh's being. He lunged forward and hauled Souders to his feet.

But Lang Elba said, "That'll do for now, kid."

Hugh fell back, more in respect to the fact that Elba had first claim on Ed Souders than in obedience to the command. He stood alert in the shadows, breathing hard, watching Souders shake his head and try to find his balance.

"Make a light, Ed," Elba ordered.

Souders stroked a match to flame with a broad thumbnail, touched it to the wick and put the chimney in place. He gave Hugh a look that promised vengeance, and then he faced around to Elba.

"Look here," he said, "there's no sense in this, Lang. What you're holdin' against me happened years ago!"

Elba nodded. "Years," he said, "that Nick Potter would have enjoyed living. Remember Nick? After you left us there in the desert—"

"The man is dead!" Souders snapped. "He has no part in this. And you've got no sentiment in you, Lang—you're not here because of anyone else. I'll give you your share of that payroll—no, I'll double it!"

Elba's long face pulled into a mirthless

grin. "Every man has his price—that's still your code, eh? I don't sell that cheap. I came here to kill a rattlesnake, but you've got me curious, Ed. You hit young Wilbur, here, but you let him crawl away to live. Your gunhawk crew caught me neat as trappin' a fool mustang, an' all they done was jabber threats at me an' herd me down to the Landing. I got a pretty good picture of what makes you tick, Ed. These doin's of yours don't line up with it at all."

Souders seemed to settle back. "I've got...my position to think about, here. I can't do things in the old way. That's why you're alive this minute, damn you."

"Position?" Elba's voice held soft and saturnine humor. "A four-bit foreman on a cow outfit—Ed, you must be gettin' old! A man like you or me is a fool when he tries to go respectable, no matter what the stakes. You was a fool when you had a rope on me an' let me go—or was you afraid? A dead man would need some explainin', an' things in the past might get brought to light."

Souders licked his lips. "A thousand dollars," he said, "over and above that payroll pot. You'll have to give me a little time to get it, but—"

He broke off there, his head jerking around to the sound of a footfall on the porch.

OLD Dan Upton was there, in boots and nightshirt, tilting his grizzled head to blink against the light. Madge was behind him, her auburn hair falling about her shoulders, a lantern in her hand.

"Ed," Dan Upton faltered, "Madge heard some shootin' out on the range to-night. Then after you an' the crew came back from wherever you went to, we heard a commotion down here an' seen your light. What's—"

Upton was inside the cabin now, and his eyes had swung to the figure of Lang

Elba behind the desk. He saw the gun in Elba's hand, and he fell into shocked silence.

Elba rose, tilting his black Stetson with his free hand and making a slight, mocking bow toward Madge Upton.

Madge's glance whipped from Elba to Hugh Wilbur. There was a stinging rebuke for him in her eyes; and there was hurt, too.

"This is the way you stand on your two feet!" she flung at him. "Bringing in a gunman!"

"Your pardon, Miss," Elba said easily. "He didn't bring me in, exactly...."

It was then that awareness seemed to leap from one to another of them. First, Lang Elba's wary eyes swung to the windows, which now were illuminated by a strange and rising red glow. Then Souders, and Dan Upton, and finally Madge and Hugh Wilbur.

"The haystacks!" Dan Upton shouted hoarsely. "Our hay's afire!" He turned and ran from the room, forgetting everything but the loss of the hay that meant feed to pull his stock through the winter.

Madge Upton gave a little moan, and a shudder ran through her shoulders.

And Ed Souders chose that moment to make a try for the hideout gun that he carried under his left arm-pit. Hugh saw the move, fast though it was, and saw the brief glint of light upon metal as Souders swung the tiny weapon toward Elba.

He flung himself against the man,

striking Souders' arm down so that the derringer fired its bullet into the wood of the desk. Then he had Souders backed up against the door jamb, and he was whipping long, cruelly jolting blows to the foreman's body.

Souders fought back. He drove hard for Hugh's jaw, jolted him, then feinted with the cool ease of experience and swung under Hugh's guard.

Hugh fell back, breath spilling from his lips. Souders' square-trimmed moustache pulled to one side in a grin of triumph and he lunged forward to complete the kill.

But Hugh dodged and put Souders off-balance with a short, solid left to the body. The foreman gave a gasp of pain; and Hugh followed up quickly with a series of blows to the spot that had brought that gasp. Then he tried for Souders' jaw and connected, flinging the man back to the door jamb again.

Souders slid down gently, not quite knocked out but helpless.

Hugh strode forward to grab the man—but then Madge was between them, her eyes blazing.

"Haven't you done enough to us?" she cried, gesturing toward the flaming haystacks that now illuminated the whole countryside. "I believed in you when you lied to me about stampeding the cattle. But if I were a man I'd kill you now!"

Hugh gaped at her, half comprehending her meaning. By some feminine twist of logic, she was blaming him for the burn-

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ing of the hay which might ruin them.

But then Lang Elba's hand touched his arm. "We better mosey, Hugh. That old cuss's yellin' will have the crew buzzin' around like hornets in a minute—"

"Yes!" Madge flung at Hugh. "Get out! And don't come back, ever!" Then she whirled to bury her face in her arms against the door, her slim body shaking as she sobbed.

Hugh lagged back; but Elba urged him to a run. "We got mighty little time, hombre. Stretch them long legs of yours!"

CHAPTER

3

Cross-Fire Tactics

The truth of that warning was brought home to Hugh before they reached the horses. The light of the fires was strong upon them; and rifle-fire reached out from the ranch to send the stinging wail of bullets past their heads. They crouched low as they ran. Then they had reached the horses and were flinging themselves into the saddles and putting the mounts to a high run away from the Arrow.

Elba looked back. The flames were at their peak now, towering hundreds of feet in the air and sending myriads of sparks much higher than that. Their glow touched Elba's long face and gave saturnine highlights to the expression of satisfaction that was there.

Hugh said, "That finishes the Arrow." And when Elba looked puzzled he explained, "You're from the South—you don't know the winters we have here. Snow'll be twenty feet deep, in the drifts. A man needs shelter for his stock, and feed to pull them through. Those long stacks were to serve the Arrow for both."

Elba nodded. "Now we'll see what Ed Souders can do about this!" he said grimly. "Somebody done a good job of helpin' us this night, Hugh. I wonder who it was?"

They got their answer to that when, having made a wide circle to throw off pursuit, they jogged upstream along the bank of the creek about mid-morning. A cautious hail reached their ears, putting their hands quickly to their guns as they swung their mounts to face the sound.

The man who rode toward them was hatless. Sunlight, slanting down through the evergreens, made his short-cropped, bristling blond hair seem afire. His pink face held a smile as he lifted a hand in greeting.

"Fritz Stolz," Hugh said to Elba. "Fritz, what brings you here?"

Stolz reined up and gave them that wide, tooth-showing, silent laugh of his. "Concern for my precious pink hide, mainly. For some reason the Arrow got to wondering whether they'd belted the wrong man for giving their cows a run, Hugh. They got to comparing tracks, and noticed that damned trick shoe the blacksmith put on my horse to cure his limp. They hit me last night, but I was ready for them and waiting. Oh, they ran me off my place all right. But it cost them a man or two—and didn't those haystacks make a ring of a fire?"

Hugh looked at Stolz with the feeling that he never had really seen the man before. Fritz had always seemed to have too much softness in him to make a go of pioneering. Now he had stampeded the Arrow's herd and he had fired their stacks of winter feed, and he could laugh about it. There was steel in the man after all, beneath that guileless exterior.

Lang Elba said, "You chose this place to come lookin' for us. Why?"

Stolz pulled down the corners of his mouth and lifted his powerfully-built shoulders. "MacInnon said you were together. This is the most isolated part of the cliffs where a man can find good horse pasture handy."

Elba gave Hugh a sidelong look. "If one man can figure that, another'll do the

same. We'll put the horses in a better place, Hugh. I know a cove in the cliffs that I thought of usin' before. Unhandy, but safe."

"Good enough!" Stolz beamed. "Next time we need our horses, we may need them bad!"

Elba bent a darkly knowing look at the rancher. "Just like that, eh? Well, maybe it's just as well you throw in with us. If I know the hombre that's callin' himself Souders, he'll cut loose his wolf in this canyon of yours now."

Madge Upton hurried out of the kitchen of the Arrow house, with a tray of food for her father. The coffee was steaming hot, the meal prepared as temptingly as she knew how. Old Dan Upton had not stirred from his chair all day—as if dazed by the blow that had been struck at him.

Before she reached the living room, however, Ed Souders came out of it and blocked the hallway. "He's feelin' some better, now," the foreman told her. "I just made him see that we ain't licked by far. We'll get the hay we need to pull us through the winter."

"But how?" Madge cried. "It would cost more than we could possibly afford, to have MacInnon bring it up the river from Lewiston."

Souders shook his head. "That tub of his can push only one barge at a time, against the current. Regardless of cost, he could never bring in enough. No, our hay's right here in the Bend. The little outfits have got it all stacked for us."

"But they hate us! They'd never sell to us—and they've only enough for their own stock."

"They'll sell to us," Souders stated flatly. "And at a price that we'll be able to pay. Madge, you've got to come around to dependin' on me. You never have understood how I feel about you—"

"I've understood you very well, Ed Souders." Madge felt color come to her cheeks, and she tried to edge past him.

But he would not let her pass. "No," he said. "I've wanted you as my wife. I was intending to wait till I got things worked around into better shape before I spoke up, but I choose to speak up now."

Madge's quick intake of breath was the only betrayal of the feeling of shock and distaste that raced through her. "I'll never marry you," she said steadily.

"Yes, you will. You'll come around to it. Just remember that I said that." He stood aside, then, to let her pass.

ELBA, Stolz, and Hugh Wilbur squatted on their high ledge and had their after-supper smokes. Elba stared out across the Bend, his manner a deep and unreadable calm. Stolz was alert, his blue eyes missing nothing. It was as if something that had been dormant within Stolz was awakened now, making him find sharp enjoyment in all this. He rose to run his glance along the short length of the trail that was visible from their perch.

"Who built this trail?" he asked.

"No tellin'," said Elba. "It follows the natural ledge, mostly. Maybe Indians used it."

"A man could stand off an army here!" Stolz exclaimed. "They'd have to come along the ledge single-file, around the bend of the cliff there. You could pick them off one by one!"

Elba chuckled. "As long as the shells held out, that'd be the general idee. Don't plan too heavy on it, though—even if they knowed we was here, they'd not be likely to try it." He swung his head toward Hugh Wilbur. "You come close to gettin' in the way of my lead last night, Hugh."

"I didn't want any shooting," Hugh said grimly. "Not with Madge Upton there where a stray bullet might have struck her."

"Figured that. It's Ed Souders' move now—which way do you reckon he'll jump now?"

It was Stolz who answered, his words hard and eager and quick as they matched the pace of his reasoning.

"He'll be hell-bent for getting the hay that the Arrow's got to have. Where's the biggest stack of the best hay in the Bend? Over there at Sam Barker's place, against the south wall. His grass was high as a steer's back before he made his cut. What we should be doing is riding by there, just in case."

Lang Elba chuckled again. "Mister, you got yourself on the wrong limb when you took to ranchin'. You should of been either a gen'ral in the army, or a road-agent. I ain't figured which. We'll take us a sashay past this Barker's place."

But it was past midnight when the three of them ranged up toward Barker's little house—three heavier shadows moved silently through the dim starlight. They had seen the light spilling out of the doorway, and the man standing on the porch to face the tight knot of riders in the yard. They had dismounted, and now their guns were in their hands as they moved forward.

Barker's thin voice came to their ears, "...seven dollars a ton! I gave you your answer when you started at four dollars. It'll still be the same when you get to seven hundred—you'll get not a handful of hay from me, nor from any other rancher in the Bend! We all saw the fires when your stacks burned. We knew you'd be after us for feed, and we made an agreement. We're together on it, mister! We hated to see feed destroyed, and if it was anyone else we'd be glad to pitch in and help. But not the Arrow—not after you come in here and start throwing wire around the best of our range. Maybe this will teach the Arrow that being neighbors works both ways."

Souders' broad body stirred impatiently in his saddle. His wide jaw lifted. "You don't seem to savy this, Barker. The Arrow asks for no help from any of

your two-bit outfits. We're buying your hay—not just a part of it, all of it!"

Hugh Wilbur had reached the end of the house now, with Elba towering beside him. And they heard Barker's puzzled reply to the statement of the Broad Arrow foreman:

"Why, I'd be a damned fool to sell all of it, under any circumstances. I've got my own stock to pull through the winter."

"You'll come around to getting some savvy in your head," Souders snapped. "The Arrow is buying your hay. We're doing you a favor at that—we could just as well have it for nothing. I've got ten men behind me here, and they've all got guns. You want 'em used on you, Barker?"

"Wait a minute!" Barker shrilled. "I've got a wife and kids in the house—"

"You should have thought of them before you made any fool agreements with the other little ranchers to buck the Arrow," Souders interrupted.

Lang Elba glanced toward Hugh, then, in the deep shadow at the end of the house. "We step into this now," he said. And then he added, softly, "Remember, Souders is my turkey."

Hugh glanced quickly around for Fritz Stolz, but the man had disappeared. There was no time to go looking for him—already Lang was easing around the corner of the house.

"Come on, Barker!" Souders was jeering now. "Make up your mind! Shorty, crease him a little to help along his thinking."

The man beside Souders drew his weapon, then. And the quick hard crash of Hugh's shot beat against the man when he was halfway through the movement. The impact of the slug wrenched him far around in his saddle, his gun fell to the ground as he fought to keep seat on his rearing mount.

The echoes of the shot rolled back from the cliffs. And Fritz Stolz' call, edged

with chilly hopefulness, reached out from the other end of the house:

"Anybody else want to try?"

SOUDERS controlled his mount with a savage yank at the reins and lifted his hand to hold his men in check. They'd be caught neatly in a cross-fire if they chose to make fight, and Souders had enough shrewdness in him to know it.

"Damn you, Wilbur," he said, his face dark with fury in the yellow glow of Barker's lamps. "And you, Lang—I'll settle with you for this."

"Go ahead," Lang Elba invited, holstering his weapon.

Souders eased back in his saddle, his eyes shifting quickly from Lang to Fritz Stolz, then to Hugh and back to Lang. Then the Arrow foreman shook his head. "I'll do my own choosing of time and place, you damned jailbird," he snapped, reining his horse sharply around. "We've nothing more to do here, boys. Somebody help Shorty, there...."

When the Arrow crew was gone, Sam Barker wrung the hands of the three who had helped him. "Boys," he said in a voice that trembled with reaction, "thanks! I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't shown up. I—I guess I'd had to sell, in spite of the agreement I made with Blackie Farr and the rest of them. We knew the Arrow'd be after our hay. We've sent a man out to Lewiston, on MacInnon's boat, to bring the law. If we can just hang on till it gets here, we'll be all right."

Lang Elba laughed softly. "You don't know Ed Souders like I do, mister. You'll not stop him with law."

Fritz Stolz said, "If you need us again, Sam, you go down to the north end of the Bend and fire two shots close together, then one ten seconds afterward. Now we better get to our horses and follow that Arrow bunch to see they don't hit any other ranch tonight."

When they reached their horses, Elba paused with boot in stirrup and swung his head toward Hugh. "That was a good shot you made."

"Except I shot at the wrong man!" Hugh said angrily. "I should have thrown it at Souders. He was your turkey, and you didn't take him!"

"He didn't bust loose. He didn't even try." Puzzlement was in Lang Elba's tone. "He ain't so respectable all of a sudden that it's robbed 'im of his nerve, damn 'im! It's like he was shootin' for somethin' big here, an' the thought of it keeps stayin' his hand, makin' 'im wait for a sure thing. But I never was the hurryin' kind. He knows I'm goin' to kill 'im—let 'im roll the thought around in his head an' get the full savor of it."

CHAPTER

4

Bitter Failure

The Arrow crew went straight across the range, a tight little group of riders in the starlight, to their home ranch. They did not emerge again that night, although Stolz and Elba and Hugh Wilbur waited until almost dawn to make sure.

Then the three made the long ride to the northern end of the range, and climbed their narrow trail.

Blackie Farr joined them next day. Hugh was awakened from a deep sleep, in mid-morning, by Fritz Stolz' urgent hand on his shoulder.

"Hugh! Wake up, man—somebody just fired the signal shots down there."

Elba was already on the ledge, his deep-set eyes searching the land far below. "One man," he said, "ridin' a pinto horse."

"Blackie Farr," said Fritz. "He's got the only pinto in the Bend. Sam Barker must have told him the signal."

Elba said, "Blackie Farr—I've heard that name somewhere."

"One more of us little fish," Stolz explained. "He took up a claim on that rise that foots the cliff just opposite the Arrow. The poorest land in the Bend, and water's hard for him to get. But Blackie said the deer hunting would be good up there. Now he must be in trouble—we better get down and see."

"Wait a minute," Hugh objected. "Lang found this place. It's for him to say whether we show ourselves."

Lang Elba chuckled. "If it hurts Ed Souders, I'm for it."

They went down the trail to get their horses and made a wide swing out across the grassland to intercept Farr.

He halted his pinto when he saw them coming, and waited, making little nervous movements in his saddle. He was a small man and a wiry one, with a habit of wearing his hat tilted far back on his head. That permitted a stubborn lock of hair to fall in front of his eyes; and he kept pushing it back into place with quick, jabbing strokes of his hand.

He pushed it back now, and then lifted the hand in greeting.

"Sam Barker said you'd help me," he told them. "The Arrow hit me last night."

"Hit you?" Stolz' pink face showed amazement. "When? What did they do?"

"They hit me before they went to Sam's place. They took my hay. That is, they made me sell it to them. Four bucks a ton!"

Stolz scowled. "They hit you first. Why would they bother with that little dab of hay of yours? I don't get that."

"How would I know?" Farr retorted angrily. "They hit me— isn't that enough for you?"

"Keep your shirt on, Blackie," Stolz said. "It puzzles me, that's all. And you sold to them, in spite of the agreement you had with Barker and the rest."

Farr snapped, "What you gonna do, when they put a gun to your ribs an' a wad of money in your hand? But it don't

stick, damn 'em—it's just a case of robbery an' it won't stand up. I told 'em so!"

"Well," Stolz inquired, "what do you aim to do about your stock? How'll you pull your cows through the winter?"

Farr looked startled then. "I—I don't know!" He twisted in his saddle to look back across the range. "I think the Arrow's after me. I think they seen me headin' this way...." His voice trailed off, and he swung back to glance toward Elba's impassive face.

Elba did not speak. It was Fritz Stolz who said, excitedly, "Then we better get you up that cliff! We've got a place where they can never get at you, Blackie."

Stolz was in high good spirits, that night at supper. Farr had been right about the Arrow being on his trail—from their high ledge they had watched the Arrow riders make their search.

Stolz said, "There's four of us now—enough to watch the Arrow night and day. When they make a move, we hit them! If Ed Souders does get his hay by gun-point bargain, it will have to be moved to the Arrow. That'll take a lot of trips back and forth with wagons, and the drivers can be picked off."

Elba grinned. "Got it all figured? Then tell me why Souders went after all that hay, not just part of it. A reasonable man would be content with a little from each of the small outfits, leavin' them enough to stand a chance of pullin' their own stock through. Give Ed his way an' the little ranchers are finished—loss of their cows will break 'em. That puts the whole Bend under the Arrow brand. Hugh, does Souders stack up to be the kind of hombre who'll build that big for the wages another man pays 'im?"

Hugh said, "No." He was aware of the subtle change that had come into Elba's attitude toward him—now Elba's manner held the respect a man grants to another whom he considers his equal.

And Hugh added, "I don't think Souders' boss would back up the way Ed went after Barker's hay, if he knew about it."

"Souders doesn't give a damn what Upton would or wouldn't back up!" Blackie Farr said suddenly. "He's solid in the saddle, there at the Arrow. He'll have the ranch for his own before he's done, damn him. He'll have Madge Upton too." Farr shot a quick glance toward Hugh Wilbur.

HUGH sensed that Farr was eager for the effect that the last statement might have upon him. Farr had courted Madge, too, when the Uptons first came to the Bend—Madge had showed quick preference for Hugh, and Farr had dropped from the running.

Hugh said nothing now. And Elba rose, towering in the dusk.

"We'll let Fritz figure it all out for us," he said, "while he's standin' guard here when we're gone tonight. The Arrow knows just about where this place is, now—they could put a man up here while we're gone an' pick us off that trail when we come back."

Stolz protested, but lost the argument. Elba, Hugh, and Blackie Farr started down the trail in the dusk to see what move the Arrow might make this night.

But the Arrow did nothing. Its lights gleamed peacefully across the range.

Lang Elba was baffled. "Damn the man!" he said, shivering to the bite of autumn chill. "There was a time when I knew just which way he'd jump. But now respectability's on 'im like a mask, an' there's no tellin' what's goin' on behind it."

They waited, while a thin shaving of a moon lifted above the cliffs. Then a rider approached them from the south, gave a cautious hail, and rode in.

It was Sam Barker. "Reckoned you'd be out here watchin' the Arrow," he said. "But they'll need make no more moves

now. They've done their bit of business, an' they've got us where they want us. Our man got back from Lewiston today. The law's not interested in the Bend. It seems there's some doubt about which county has jurisdiction—there's never been a survey in here. An' maybe the law's afraid of the ride up that river on Mac's little boat."

"An' maybe," Elba said, "that law was bought up by the Arrow. Souders has done it before. But it needn't lick you, Man!"

"Hear me out," Barker said patiently. "MacInnon didn't go downriver this trip—he sent those two men he hired to run his boat. When they got back he was waiting on his wharf. He told our man that the Arrow moved in on him, bought him out in a gun-point deal an' left him with orders to run the business their way. Arrow owns the store, the stock, the *River Queen*. MacInnon can sell us nothing—not even food for our kids nor salt for our stock. But he can *give* us all one thing. Transportation down the river an' out of the Bend. Arrow's got a man posted at his place to make sure Alec does as he's told."

Elba grunted. "What was that guess I made, Hugh? The whole Bend under the Arrow brand—this will do it, if he makes it stick."

Barker fidgeted in his saddle, and said, "MacInnon's got warm blood in him. He spoke to our man in a low voice an' said that while he could sell us nothing, he couldn't be expected to prevent a burglary. One wagon-load of supplies taken out of there would get us through the winter."

Elba slapped his thigh. "An' it would kill Souders' whole scheme! I'm likin' this more an' more!"

"It would give us a chance," Barker said. He chuckled dryly and went on, "MacInnon's words were, 'Take what you need, but list every item for the bill, mind!' Arrow'll have the store guarded,

though. An' we thought that maybe you. . . ." Barker let it trail, and lifted an anxious glance to Hugh's face and to Elba's.

"Figured it was in our line, eh?" Elba said. "We'll do it. You get a wagon ready for us, make a deal with Hugh here about the best place for us to pick it up."

"Yeah," Blackie Farr put in. "We'll do your dirty work for you, Sam."

Barker swung an angry glance toward Farr. "You said you wanted to hit back at the Arrow," he snapped. "After you broke the agreement an' sold your hay to 'em!"

"I am hittin' 'em," Farr retorted. "More'n the rest of you are willin' to do, seems like!"

"Let it be, Blackie," Hugh ordered. He sensed that something was rankling inside Farr—probably a feeling of guilt, the knowledge that he alone had weakened under the Arrow's guns.

It was agreed that a wagon with a good fast team should be concealed in a thicket a half-mile from the Landing, at nine the following night. Barker thanked Hugh and Elba and turned back toward his ranch.

Elba said, "No use freezin' here for the rest of the night. We'll go see if Fritz's figurin' forswore all this."

Blackie Farr rode with them for a mile or two then reined his horse to one side. "I left my place in a hurry" he said. "All upset like I was, I forgot I had some money hidden in that box I use for a cupboard. I better go get it before the Arrow does."

"We'll go with you," Elba said. "Arrow might have a man or two prowlin' around, on the chance you'd go back there."

"No—I'll get through," Farr said quickly. "Less chance of one rider being noticed than three. See you at the hide-out."

It was noon when Blackie Farr came up the narrow ledge trail. There was a

quick urgency in his movements, and he smiled to himself as if at some inner pleasure. He'd had no trouble, he said, no trouble at all. He pushed back his stray lock of hair, and he peered at Hugh Wilbur.

"I seen Madge Upton" he said, "on her way to the Landing for supplies. So I rode out an' stopped her. We had a talk. She says she's gettin' married week after next, to Ed Souders."

The flat statement struck Hugh Wilbur like a blow. Blackie's manner held too much assurance, for this to be mere talk.

Hugh came to his feet, his mind groping for an explanation for Madge's act and finding none. He buckled his gunbelt on and he heard himself say, "I'm taking a ride."

Lang Elba roused up. "Where to?"

Hugh did not answer that directly. He was thinking that if he made a quick ride he could intercept Madge on her way back from the Landing. He had to have the truth of this from her own lips. He said, "Something personal, Lang. I'll meet you at that wagon Barker's sending, tonight. Blackie knows where to find it."

MADGE pulled her buckboard team to a halt, there in the brushy draw where Hugh stood waiting in the road. Her hair was done up in a kerchief today, and her face held subtle shadows of unhappiness.

"Hugh," she said, "what do you want."

"I've got to know," he told her.

"Blackie Farr says you're marrying Souders. If that's true, you're marrying a crook and a killer. I've got to know why."

"Blackie Farr—" Madge seemed puzzled, but then her chin came up. "I'll not listen to you, Hugh. I've been nursing Shorty Weeks, the man you nearly killed. You've turned outlaw and killer yourself, and anything that was between us is dead. Get out of my way, Hugh, or I'll—I'll shoot you myself!"

He saw her lift a .30-30 rifle from the seat, then, and he smiled at the weapon, not giving a damn one way or the other.

But he sensed the quick lift of her glance as she looked beyond him. He saw the expression of shock and fear that came to her face; and he heard the whisper of sand under a moving boot close behind him.

He started to turn, but knew that he was too late. Something crashed down against his skull and he pitched forward into darkness.

He awakened by degrees. First there was awareness of the hammering pain inside his head, then the yellow glare that finally narrowed down to a lamp which stood on the desk. He was in Ed Souders' log-cabin office at the Arrow and he was bound tightly to a straight-backed chair.

It was night outside. And at the end of the room, Shorty Weeks lay on a cot, bandages swathed his chest. Shorty had a gun in his hand and he watched Hugh with a feverish, unwavering stare.

"Try something," Shorty invited. "Go ahead—you've kept me waitin' long enough, damn you! Ed's had to handle you with gloves on, because of that gal. Even today, she kicked up a row about the way they belted you over the head with a gun barrel. So Ed loaded you into the buckboard an' sent a man to bring you here. But after tonight, mister, the lid's off. Ed's got a little ruckus comin'

up at the Landin' tonight—my guess is that when it's over, you'll get yours."

Hugh tried to quell the throbbing of his head, and tried to think. Souders was at the landing . . . he knew, then, about the planned raid to get supplies for the little ranchers. Blackie Farr had told him! Blackie Farr had sold more than his hay, and had joined Lang and Fritz Stolz and Hugh to spy on them. Blackie had known that word of Madge's coming marriage to Souders would send Hugh running to get the truth of it. That had been a neat way of taking out one man, from the group that must be dealt with at the Landing. . .

Madge came into the cabin with a tray of food which she placed on Weeks' cot. She gave Hugh one quick glance, yet he sensed the half-concealed anxiety that lay behind it.

"Madge," he said, "you've got to let me out of here."

She faced him then. "I'm not entirely a fool, Hugh Wilbur. I know what you want—I made Ed tell me why he was taking the crew down to the Landing. You want to save those outlaw friends of yours. You'd keep them from getting what they deserve, when they try that raid tonight. You've killed one man, wounded another, burned all our winter hay. Oh, I know you didn't do all those things with your own hands, but you're with the men who did. How fast can a man turn completely outlaw?"

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Hugh looked at her steadily. "You're talking to me, but you're arguing with yourself. You're not sure. Why are my friends raiding the Landing?"

"To starve out the Arrow," she said promptly. "They burned the hay to starve our cattle—now they know that we've bought the store to protect ourselves, and they plan to destroy it."

Hugh smiled. "Ed has told it tall. The Arrow bought that store to starve out the little ranchers. MacInnon has orders to give them nothing except transportation down the river."

"That's not true! Dad wouldn't—"

"It has been the Arrow's aim from the beginning, to crowd everyone else out of the Bend. To throw all this range into one big ranch. Shorty, you boys threw a peach of a scare into Barker the other night, to make him sell all of his hay. You'd have done it too, if we hadn't showed up."

"Sure," Weeks boasted. "An' Ed'll get that hay, every forkful of it, before he's fin—" The man broke off, realizing that he had been tricked, and fell into angry silence.

Madge turned to stare at him. "All of it? Why, that would leave him nothing for his own stock!"

"All of it!" Hugh said harshly. "The Arrow wants all the Bend, remember. Those men down at the Landing aren't out to destroy Alec's store tonight—they want only enough food to pull the little ranchers through. Souders has lied to you. Has he lied to your dad? We all thought Dan Upton was the Arrow, but maybe he isn't any more. Maybe the Arrow is Ed Souders!"

A sound that was something like a sob escaped Madge's throat. Her lovely face showed the emotions, powerful and conflicting as the currents of the river down in Hell's Canyon, that were within her. Then her head came up and, wounding herself between Hugh and the wounded man, she moved toward Weeks' cot.

"Give me that gun, Shorty," she said. Weeks swallowed. "Madge, I don't want to shoot you, but—"

"You won't. You know that Ed would tear you apart if you harmed me." She was close to Weeks now; and in a pouncing move she struck at his arm. The gun fell to the floor and she picked it up and backed toward Hugh's chair.

SHE found a knife, and in a moment she had slashed Hugh's bonds. Then they were outside on the porch, and she was locking the door behind her.

"Hugh," she said softly, "you've got to understand. Ed came to me and said that all those men who filed on homesteads for Dad weren't Dad's men at all, but his. That the Arrow was his—but he'd let Dad have his illusion if I would marry him. Dad has been so changed, since Mother died and he lost the other ranch. He just sits there in the house, staring out through the window and seeing nothing. I knew that he never could stand another smash. Oh Hugh, forgive me."

Hugh bent his head to taste again the pliant sweetness of her lips, to seek and to find the warm promise that was there. Then he swung away. "I've got to have a horse," he said.

"In the corral—I'll help you. Hugh, I can't ask you to be careful in this thing that you must do. But . . . come back to me."

With a horse caught up and saddled, he mounted, and reined quickly away to turn his face toward the Landing.

He still was half a mile away from the Landing when he heard the rumbling roar of the guns, and knew that he was too late. The trap had been sprung.

Despair flooded through him, akin to his feeling on that morning when he awoke on the knoll and looked down upon the burned-out ruin of his hopes. Madge had listened to her heart, and gambled on him, and he had failed her.

But he rode on into the Landing, finding the place as silent, now, as a tomb. The buildings were shadowed and in the light of the new moon the little *River Queen* moved uneasily at her moorings in response to the tug of the river current.

There were horses in the street, dragging their reins as they shied this way and that, spooked by the gunfire that now was done.

Hugh scanned the rooftops for sign of Souders' men. But none was there.

He dismounted and stepped up onto MacInnon's porch, his long spare body moving with the silence of a drifting cloud-shadow.

CHAPTER 5 *Hidden Bend Roundup*

Inside the store there was only a black silence. The door stood open, its glass shattered and gone. Hugh moved into the big room, and his foot touched something and elicited a groan. He knelt, reaching down until his fingers felt bristling, close-cropped hair.

It was Fritz Stolz. Breath was in him still, and his words were barely audible.

"Hugh? Watch out for them. We waited for you a long while, and you didn't come, so we came down here anyway and walked into a trap. Fritz is done—but Fritz got that damned little snake of a Blackie! He put himself behind us when we came in, and he shot Lang when the thing broke loose. Then he tried to run forward to get behind the counter with the rest of them, and Fritz shot him in the back as he richly deserved."

"Where is Lang?" Hugh asked.

"Over there near the bar somewhere. They put lead into him a dozen times, but he kept shooting."

Hugh said, "Hang tight, Fritz," and moved on in search of Lang Elba.

He found the outlaw near the bar, sprawled on his face and more dead than

alive. "Lang," he whispered. "Lang Elba!"

The big form stirred. "Hugh . . . keep down, man!" He tried to rise, and failed. "They're waitin' for you. They saw you comin', an' I heard 'em talkin'. They're back in the warehouse somewheres. They are scared of you, Hugh."

"Of me?" Hugh whispered, puzzled.

Elba gave a low chuckle. "As a man, you stack up taller than you know. We done a fair job on 'em, Fritz an' me, startin' as we did with a stacked deck when that damned Blackie brung us into a trap." Elba made a sound that held sardonic mirth. "I should have knowed better than put trust in him! Soulders has got two, maybe three men left. Hugh, he's . . . your turkey now."

Hugh put his hand to the bar, fixing in his mind the direction of it, remembering that it pointed straight toward the double doorway that led into MacInnon's warehouse. He moved forward.

His reaching hands found the casing of the doorway. The doors stood open invitingly. But he paused, full of awareness of the fact that they were waiting for him in there. They'd be fortified up behind the high piles of merchandise—spools of barbed wire, coils of rope, boxes of clothing and canned goods. Any sound he might make, any glimmer of light reflected from his belt buckle, or the muzzle flash of his gun if he fired a challenging shot, would bring their lead converging upon the doorway.

His straining ears found no sound that would locate their positions for him. There was only a subdued thumping that came from the direction of Alec MacInnon's living quarters, upstairs above the store. The trader was cooped up there, probably, to keep him out of mischief.

But those quarters of his were reached by a stairway that angled up the wall of the warehouse, reached a landing, then swung back toward the rooms at the front of the building. Hugh grinned tautly,

moved through the doorway without sound and groped for the stairway.

He mounted the steps one by one, putting his boots down with infinite care, until he reached the landing. The stairway had carried him the length of the warehouse wall; now he was at the river end of the building and behind the Arrow men who faced that double doorway with their chosen defenses in front of them. In addition, he now was higher than they.

He plucked a cartridge from his belt and tossed it, with a long and easy swing of his arm, toward the doorway.

It struck the floor with a sharp little sound that ran through the silence like a crack through a piece of breaking ice. Instantly, it triggered a roar of guns and bright stabs of muzzle flame that reached toward that empty doorway.

Two of the guns were over against the wall opposite Hugh, the third was almost directly beneath his position. He fired then, laying his shots directly behind the muzzle flashes at the far wall.

A man screamed, in a way that made it clear he never would scream again. The other gun flung a panicky burst of shots toward Hugh, but he had shifted his position on the landing and the lead pounded into the wall.

He put a shot a foot to the right of that weapon's flash and heard the dull fall of a man's body.

BUT he paid for that. The third man, who had fired no shot until now, had made a quick shift of position, from beneath Hugh's location to a point near the big doors that opened on the wharf. And now he fired. His first shot struck Hugh with an impact that was more jolt than pain. It spun Hugh around and flung him back against the wall, and with all sense of balance gone he slid down that wall to crumple on the floor of the stairway landing.

It was that fact that saved him, though.

The man hammered out four more shots in deliberate series, spacing them to rake across the landing at chest height. Had Hugh been standing he'd have been struck again, certainly. But as it was the shots went over his head.

He put all of his will into the task of forcing his body to function. Pain was in him now, but it flooded all through him and he couldn't tell where he was hit. He could move his arms and his legs, however, and he hitched forward on his knees to put a hand to the railing for steadiness as he threw a shot toward the location of his opponent.

It brought a sharp gasp, a scraping of boots on the plank floor as the man fought to keep his feet. Then Hugh heard the squeal of the big sliding door moving on its track, and through the growing opening he saw the sheen of the river under the moonlight.

He saw the blocky body of Ed Souders lurch through that opening and out onto the wharf. And an exultant fire ran through him; Souders was on the run!

He fired another shot at the man and missed because Souders dodged quickly from sight. He lifted himself over the railing and dropped, landing on a stack of rope-coils that cascaded with him to the floor. He reared to his feet and paused, jacking the empties from his gun and thumbing fresh loads into the chambers.

Then he stepped through the doorway and out onto the wharf.

Souders was there, crouched in the moonlight like a gnome, trying to reload his own empty weapon. His breathing was a hoarse wheeze, and his wound had cost him the use of his right arm which now dangled uselessly. With only one hand he found himself unable to put shells in the gun, and he tossed it from him with an angry grunt.

"Souders," Hugh ordered, "stand still."

The man's teeth gleamed briefly.

Then he saw the gleam of metal in Souders' left hand. It was a knife—and before Hugh's pain-numbed mind could comprehend Souders' purpose the blade had slashed one of the lines that moored the *River Queen*.

Hugh tried to run forward to grapple with the man.

He fired again, and missed. He saw the knife slash that other line, saw the little *River Queen* swing to the urge of the current and veer away from the wharf.

Rage pushed back, for a moment, the lassitude that bullet-shock was building within him. He fired once again, saw Souders jerk and pitch over the edge and down into the water. He tried to move forward, thinking to get hold of a rope and put it across the growing gap between the boat and the wharf. But he could not. He was going down into blackness.

Hugh's last thought was that Ed Souders had lost, yet in his venomous way he had won. He had severed the Bend's only connection with the world outside. In half an hour the boat would be whirling down through Hell's Canyon, where the rip-currents would smash her.

HUGH felt the steady pulse of an engine, and it puzzled him. It seemed that his mind had been grappling with the mystery of it for hours while he drifted up toward full consciousness.

He lay on an improvised bunk. Through a port, inches from his face, he saw the high rock walls of Hell's Canyon sliding swiftly by.

He turned his head and saw that Madge was perched on the edge of his bunk.

She smiled and put soft fingers across his lips. "You mustn't try to talk. You've been wounded, and we're taking you down to Lewiston to a doctor. You're not to worry about anything now, my dear—everything is right at last. Dad was wrong when he tried to fence in a lot of the

range—he did it because he was afraid. He won't be afraid now, when we make him understand. We'll take down the wire, and the Arrow will run its stock on the range with its neighbors, make roundup with them. Already they've promised to share their hay with us."

Hugh felt the gentle pressure of her hand on his, and knew that the future would be good. "But I still don't understand," he said. "I saw the *River Queen* drifting down—"

Alec MacInnon entered then, sharply cheerful and businesslike.

"I said there was a tough core inside you, lad! You're going to be needed in the Bend—this thing leaves wounds that are deeper even than the one you've got, and they'll be a long time in the healing. It needs a strong and steady hand to guide that process—mind that you get well soon to supply it. We've got Fritz Stolz out there on the afterdeck, and a couple of Souders' men who weren't quite dead. Fritz thinks he's a gone one and wills you his razor, but I've no doubt he'll have need of it himself. We've a couple of Arrow lads roped to the deckhouse too—they broke and ran when Elba threw hell in their faces. This girl of yours had rounded up the small ranchers and convinced them they had a duty to do, and they reached the landing in time to capture the pair."

Hugh said, "But this boat of yours—I saw it drift away!"

MacInnon nodded. "Aye, you did. It lodged against the bank a few yards downstream. You see I had the notion there'd be fireworks, and though Souders' men wouldn't let me leave the Landing I managed to slip under the wharf and secure an extra line to the rudder post."

The trader saw the returning strength in Hugh Wilbur's face, then. And the radiance that was in Madge's eyes. Being a man of discretion, he withdrew.

SHERIFF BAIT

Law-dog Luke Bucker had a preview of hell when he matched gunfire with a borderland desperado—in a sheriff-hanging town.

Two Mexicans suddenly appeared.



By
MEL COLTON

LUKE rode slowly toward the town, his big black snuffing against a lazy drift of wind that hung low on the soft shifting sands. He seemed to drift like the warm wind, without effort or intent; and yet there was purpose in his dreamy eyes, in the half-sad smile that lurked about his sober lips; and in the way his long thin fingers were tipped with nervousness, betraying a high strung trigger-fast young mind. His gun was snug

against limb, low and angled comfortably in a half-holster.

Purpose in his new job; purpose in the thought: This is my first job as a sheriff; and my father's name and reputation, having been strung from a cottonwood, will not help me any—but I must try.

Luke suddenly reined in as a rider coming at him from right angles on a white-faced bay loomed up and reined in also. Both eyed each other with curiosity. Luke saw the figure of a girl, golden hair tossing free and easy on her shoulders. Her dappled greenish eyes were serious under

the shadow of a small frown. A short nose set with a tip of arrogance above firm full lips.

Luke saw a resolute girl of not more than twenty, in a plaid shirt with half sleeves and riding gloves. Her limbs were long and slender in an easy fitting pair of blue jeans tucked in riding boots. And in her greenish-dappled eyes Luke saw steady and deep, calm and fury-to-hell if unleashed in storm.

And he saw those eyes open wide as they glanced at his new badge on the left shirt front; and her serious mouth broke into a grin across her face. Then she bowed in mockery: "The new sheriff, I assume?"

Luke wiggled his tongue around dry lips and over his teeth. When she came up from her bow, Luke was still watching her without much change of expression.

Her eyes covered him from his high-crowned Stetson to his bright shirt and doeskin trousers and down to his polished cheyenne boots. "So Jal Crouch's asking for kids to do his dirty work," she said, accompanying the words with a half-laugh. "You must be all of nineteen."

Fury ripped through Luke's sensitive nature. He didn't care for the way she acted, but he managed politely:

"Twenty-four, ma'am."

"My, my," she said, then slapped her bay and whipped away, riding ahead at a good pace toward the town. Luke shook his head slowly and continued toward the town and his new post as sheriff of Argus. But his thoughts were bothersome. This Jal Crouch was the one that had asked the Marshal at Central for a sheriff to replace the old one who had died. And yet this girl made it known that Jal Crouch used men to do his dirty work—the sheriff no doubt.

Nobody paid much attention to Luke as he hit town and ambled down a small irregular street lined with shabby buildings, decrepit with age and misuse, front-

ing the street in a last desperate effort to be respectable. There was a small 'dobe constructed shack cramped between a hotel and notions' store that bore a flimsy sign: Sheriff's Office and Jail.

Luke stopped and hitched a loose knot and entered. The jail itself he assumed was in the back. Small mounds of sand were stacked against the boards, bright with heat; and within the porch shade two Indian bucks slept, huddled against the support.

His step on the porch did not waken them, and he pushed the door open and entered. A bull-faced, heavy-jawed man opened thin eyes and surveyed him at leisure. He was squatted behind an old battered desk, feet atop, and looking comfortable.

His eyes caught Luke's badge and his lips moved slightly: "You must be the new sheriff—"

Luke steadied his eyes on the man. "Who are you?" he asked.

For a moment there appeared uncertainty in the man's eyes. Then he nodded his head, turned slightly and spat against the wall. There might have been contempt in that gesture—direct contempt for him, Luke thought.

"I'm Gruther. I'm your deputy."

"Who said so?"

"Appointed. Same as you. Appointed."

"The Marshal at Central appointed me," Luke snapped.

The man shrugged. He got up showing cross-belts and the habit of keeping his eyes thin. He was a large man, heavy in chest and broad-hipped. He said: "Jal Crouch asked the Marshal, and Jal appointed me to break you in, kid." He said, 'kid' with emphasis. "Come along, sheriff, and meet Crouch."

Luke watching the new deputy realized that he probably hadn't done an honest day's work in his life. But Luke made a slight motion of resignation. "Maybe I ought to—"

GRUTHER patted Luke on the back and they strode out into the street and across to Crouch's Emporium. A few ranchers turned weary eyes at them as they entered the saloon. The Emporium was empty, being off hours, but the bar managed to have a few hangers. It was a large, square barn affair with the bar in the front and a partition separating it from the gambling room behind. In front there was a piano and tables with checkered tablecloths.

Gruther motioned with his head, then knocked sharply on a door that set between the end of the bar and the gambling partition. He barked: "Me, Gruther."

He opened the door and Luke followed in behind. There were two men in the room. One sat on a chair holding the making of a smoke. He squinted from behind bushy eyebrows but said nothing. The other was sitting by a roll-top desk. He was big and solid with jowls beginning to show age. His eyes were slanted at the ends and half closed giving the impression of continuous suspicion. His mouth was wrapped around a fat black cigar; and his hand was slowly taking the cigar from his mouth as they entered.

"Here's our new sheriff, Jal," Gruther addressed the man at the desk.

Jal Crouch smiled. "Glad to know you, sheriff. Sure need a good one at Argus."

Luke said nothing but he didn't like the setup. He didn't like Gruther, nor Jal Crouch, nor the bushy-eyebrowed hombre fixing a smoke. It was all too close, too confined, too much the feeling that he was slowly being ground into a well-oiled machine. And the girl's insult still rang in his ears. Luke wasn't comfortable. His dreamy eyes and half-sad smile did not betray his feelings; on the contrary gave the wrong impression of stupidity and melancholy.

Jal stuck his cigar back in his mouth and settled back in his chair. He folded his hands over his stomach and played

restlessly with a gold piece on the watch chain. After a few seconds of calculating silence, he said: "I own this cowtown. It's mine. I run it and I like running it. And I like people to like my running it. I'm democratic in a way, sheriff, and me and you can get along just fine—if you remember that."

"I ain't aiming to interfere in your business, Crouch," Luke said, "as long as you don't interfere with mine."

Jal's eyes tightened and the hombre with the makings looked up as his mouth thinned into a wire. Gruther grunted and took a deep breath. Then Jal shrugged his massive shoulders and his eyes raked quickly over the lean kid with the new star and dreamy eyes. And with a wave of his hand he pushed the tension aside and laughed: "Good, sheriff. What we need is one that can stand up for his right."

Luke said casually: "That all?"

Jal nodded and Luke turned and backed out and into the saloon. Gruther did not follow him this trip. Outside, Luke stood and surveyed the town. There were frames and 'dobses set back from the road and scattered here and there among the foothills and rangelands around the town. But the main street interested Luke mostly. At the other edge of town was a saddle shop and stall barn for transient travelers, and next to that a mercantile store which bore the name of Jal Crouch, proprietor, and then the Emporium which also belonged to Crouch. Next to that a curio shop run by Mexicans.

Across the street was a restaurant with white curtains drawn across its front, the hotel, the sheriff's office and jail, the notion shop and then at the far corner, the bank.

Luke stepped down from the Emporium and made his way to the restaurant. He was hungry but so far what had happened, had not helped his stomach any. He hesitated by the white curtains and then

opened the door. A small bell shook at his entrance. It was a neat, clean place with a counter and table and chairs set conveniently about. And behind the counter was the girl who had mocked him at the cross-roads. A white apron was over her plaid shirt and jeans. Luke took off his hat and sat down at the counter.

She didn't seem surprised at seeing him. "Well, sheriff, see you were making the necessary peace with Jal Crouch already." She placed a glass of water down with a thump. "Always pays to play it safe."

"You serve meals or make preacher-speeches," Luke snapped back before he meant to.

SHE turned and stared at him. She seemed to be picking his features apart, one by one and it caused Luke to drop his head slightly. She saw his curly brown hair and noticed his high-crowned Stetson on the counter. "At least you took your hat off," she admitted. "What'll you have, sheriff?"

Luke gave his order and she in turn repeated it to a fat, greasy-faced cook. She turned back and said: "My name's Reba Conaster, and maybe I tagged you wrong—"

"Maybe. My name's Luke—"

"Luke what?"

He was afraid of that. "Luke Bucker."

Her face paled for the instance, then it passed. "Bucker's a bad name," she said and their eyes met. Luke shied away. Woman's eyes always bothered him. He wasn't any good at that game. She leaned on her elbows and spoke close to him. "Look, I don't know whose side you're on, fella, but we got a decent side here in Argus, believe it or not. There's a lot of nice friendly people who stay in their own back yards and keep out of town if they can. And they turn their backs on what's going on—"

She stopped as she followed Luke's attention to the shadow beyond the cur-

tained window. She noticed Luke's face stay calm and his eyes dreamy, but his shoulder shifted as his hand lowered, and she liked that slow, catlike precision and the smooth, unruffled way in which he set himself.

The shadow reached the door and opened it. The small bell rattled and Gruther came in. He grinned at Reba and sat down beside Luke. "So you've met our new sheriff," he said.

"Yes, and he's just like the rest of you."

Gruther laughed and elbowed Luke playfully with an elbow. "Cute trick, Reba." He reached out for her arm but she moved quickly from his reach. Gruther laughed again.

Luke sat and watched Gruther make this play. That Gruther was trying to get him riled up was obvious. And Luke didn't know whether Reba was in the same game or not. But he did know that this was just the first of many petty tests that he was going to have to wade, fight or shoot through in this town.

Gruther kept looking wolfishly at Reba. "Better be nice to me," he warned her. "I'm the new deputy sheriff here and you gotta obey law and order."

Reba's eyes set to Luke. There was deep meaning of disgust in them for they told Luke he was just another tin-sheriff.

Outside the sudden rush of fast horses and above the curtains dark flashes of riders swept by, and then came the clattering of quick stops and that of dismounting. Gruther leaned over to Luke and muttered: "Looks like Señor Valdez and his boys are in town for a party. Better show the people around here what a great sheriff you are, kid. Go and chase 'em out of town. They're bad." With that Gruther got up, winked suggestively at Reba and left. He was laughing on his way out.

Reba came with Luke's order and set it down in front of him. Without looking up, Luke asked: "Who's Señor Valdez?"

"Trouble. For decent people. He's a

big man on the border. Runs everything from gambling to smuggling Mexicans to rustling cattle into Mexico. A friend of Jal Crouch's." Not getting any reaction from Luke, she continued: "And one of these days we might get rid of such."

The small bell rattled again, and a tall, dapper man with a smooth face and large black eyes, a weak chin and mouth came in and sat down at the far end of the counter. A small trimmed mustache graced his upper lip and he was dressed in a white shirt and black tie, a blue suit and he carried an air of indifference that stamped him as a business man and above the ordinary run.

He smiled tiredly at Reba. Luke saw Reba smiling at him and getting very friendly. Luke didn't approve of that, but he didn't know, or let himself realize why he didn't approve.

The man ordered coffee and Reba asked: "How's the bank today, Dick?"

He patted her hand and she didn't move at his touch. "Culver payroll just came in," he mentioned. "And about our usual ride tonight, Reba, I might be a little late. But you go ahead and I'll meet you—"

Luke flipped a silver dollar on the counter, pushed his plate away and taking his hat, left the restaurant. Outside Luke saw the biting white sands that drifted in from the foothills, and the shimmering heat seemed to rise up from the street and create a low blanket of white haze. He saw a sombrero-topped Mexican leading a dozen horses from the front of the Emporium to the public stalls. Mentally Luke tabbed the bank's location. And everything seemed to wait and hang like the heat, dead and silent—a good preview of hell.

AND then it broke loose in yells and screams and a volley of wild shots. The batwings of the Emporium slammed against the hinges as two Mexicans—

Valdez's gunslingers—came tumbling out, bouncing to the street and slapping dust in the air a foot high.

Each had a gun and were rolling over in the road trying to gain their feet. And then the heavy figure of Gruther followed out and he stepped down off the porch, yanked both Mexicans to their feet and banged their heads together.

Gruther had silenced both of them when Luke came up. "Doing a little work for you, sheriff, while you were a-moonin' over Reba."

The batwings were filled with an audience.

"Who are they?"

"Couple of Señor Valdez's boys. Got a little too much snake poison in one gulp." Gruther kicked them. "I'm gonna lock them up till they are sober," he added. "Gotta keep the town clean for the new sheriff." Then he proceeded to take the Mexicans by the necks and shoved them across the street and into the office and jail. Luke turned and saw the audience, and as he started to go up the wooden steps to the Emporium's porch he noticed the banker named Dick heading back for the bank.

The audience separated for Luke as he entered the saloon. Half a dozen Valdez's boys—dressed in black bellbottom trousers and short boots, with fancy carved holsters and walnut gun butts—were at the bar drinking and hustling talk. Jal Crouch's men were scattered about, but most of the noise came from behind the partition where the gaming tables were located. Coming around the end of the bar, Luke turned and came into the gambling room. There was Señor Valdez, a large, overly-fed, dark-skinned Mexican with a large mustache, a big nose and gimlet eyes. He wore a tanned, goat-skinned jacket with ornate conchas and he was laughing and talking loudly through a gold-fested mouth. Next to him was the bushy-eyebrowed worker of

Jal's and Jal himself was drinking with the Mexican. Three sullen Mexicans stood obediently behind their leader.

Señor Valdez caught sight of Luke first and he stopped talking and smiled broadly. "Ees these the new shereef?"

Jal looked up. "That's him, Señor." He addressed Luke. "Sheriff, this is my friend from the Border, a vaquero of great merit, Señor Valdez. It seems a few of his boys got a little too high."

Señor Valdez did a slight nod. "Eef they cannot hold their weesky, then pouf—put them away." Everybody laughed and Valdez roared, flush with wine.

Jal said. "The sheriff looks worried. Maybe we oughta put our guns away in case one goes off accidentally."

Valdez stopped laughing, abruptly, as though a switch had been thrown. Then he nodded his big head in agreement. "Valdez ees peaceful man." And with that he reached down and brought up two beautiful pearl-handled guns and laid them on the table. Jal reached in his coat pocket and brought his gun out and did likewise. Soon everyone in both the gambling room and saloon had placed their guns on the table.

Jal Crouch called out to his bartender who took a checkered tablecloth, dumped the guns into it, wrapped it and departed.

Luke trembled with inward rage, but he held his feelings. Only the twitching of his fingertips revealed his torment.

They were mocking him, goading, trying to get him to break, one way or another. Against his will, but with better judgment, Luke turned and walked out of the room and the saloon, followed by a wave of boisterous laughing. In firm, hurried strides he crossed the street and entered the sheriff's office. He met Gruther coming from the back.

Gruther threw the jail keys and two of the Mexican's guns on the desk. "I got them settled." Just then the two cellmates broke out in a jabbering Mexican singsong, and Gruther grinned. "That is, settled in one place. They maybe a little loud—"

LUKE nodded. He didn't care for the way Gruther was taking over. But he said nothing and Gruther went out and across to the saloon—to report his work, no doubt. Luke opened the door leading from the office to the jail itself, which occupied the back half of the building. Iron bars were set vertically from the floor and bars were run across the ceiling similarly to a wild animal's cage. Inside the square cell was a hard bench which served as bench and bed. In the rear of the building there was a door, bolted securely, and Luke saw small flakes of sand that had drifted in and over the threshold, powdering the floor.

The two incarcerated Mexicans kept up their singsong and Luke checked the



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cell-door. It was locked. And yet, standing there Luke felt the tension, strong; a vibrating tension that telegraphed against his nerves like a wireless-key punching code.

It was in the heaviness of the air and in the dryness of the heat; in the smell of the dry rot and the ever presence of that forced planned laughter from the saloon. It was in the way Señor Valdez rode into town, and Dick, the banker telling Reba about the Culver payroll; and in the two playful Mexicans now languishing in his jail.

He walked out through the office and shoulder-slumped against the doorframe. Looking out he saw the steeply-sloped mesas dipping shades of deep purple into the dried-up gullies and where the flat lands spread out to be broken only by clumps of mesquite; and the ever glare of the sun, mixing with the sands, lay like clouds of white lace.

And he saw the street and heard the activity from the noisy Emporium where the noise crept through like sneak-thieves to remind him of what lay ahead. He saw Reba come out from the restaurant, in her riding clothes, lock the door, and walk passed without noticing him, only to disappear into the bank. To arrange for her late date, Luke surmised.

He heard the restless stamping of the horses from the public stalls and he felt the very day itself was tiring with the dipping sun, weary of the heat and the intrigue of human greedy minds and the plans he knew were in the making. And Luke knew he must be careful because he was on the verge of exploding and with the least spark he, the new sheriff, would have difficulty in controlling his pent-up nerves.

Luke stepped into the street and strolled over to the public stalls. It was a large, roomy barn where one side was the blacksmith's equipment and on the other side were the row of stalls, neatly

bedded and stocked. A small watering trough was in the middle. Heavy matting of straw softened the hard wooden floor.

In the stalls, carefully groomed were, Luke assumed, Valdez's roans of various shades of bay and chestnut with sturdy hinds and well kept manes. Luke stepped over to examine them. Two dark-skinned, shallow-eyed Mexicans suddenly appeared and blocked him. Luke pointed to his badge.

They reacted instantly with a drawn knife and a gun. Luke retraced a few feet and watched them carefully. He looked for the caretaker but he was nowhere around. And yet, his iron rod was laying red-tipped on the forging stone and a horse needed shodding.

Glancing to the rear of the stalls, which also had an entrance, he saw three horses, dust-laden and ridden hard. They were ranchers' mounts with small bodies and quick, nervous movements. And there was Reba's white-faced bay. Luke walked over and checked the bay. The Mexicans stood eyeing him but made no move. Apparently they were just protecting their leader's mounts. Luke ran a soft palm over the bay's saddle and then patted the horse.

On sudden thought, Luke walked out through the rear entrance, came around to the front and met Reba coming out from the bank. Luke tipped his hat and Reba brushed by. Luke shrugged and entered the bank.

A slight, bald-headed man came running up to the door with hands extended. "We are closing for the day," he announced. Luke pushed him aside, roughly, and glanced at Dick who was behind a cashier's sign. He saw Luke from the corner of his eye, but he kept counting money and making notations in a black ledger.

Luke moved to a door marked: Private. He knocked as a harsh, impatient voice answered: "Yes?"

LUKE pushed the door and entered a small office. A barred window faced the street, a desk was in a corner in front of files, and chairs surrounded the desk. A large-headed man with a strong face was getting up and looked with stern eyes at Luke. This was the banker. But three others in the room interested Luke as they made an instinctive movement to their Winchesters on their sides. Three wind-seared faces, long and sober; with the addition of double holsters carrying guns.

The banker stared at Luke, saw the badge, and said: "Yes?"

Luke said: "I'm the new sheriff."

The three ranchers snickered but the banker took a more serious pose. "Yes, we know," he snapped. "We know all about you, Buckner, and we're taking our own protection, thank you."

Buckner! He knew his name. Had Reba spread it about? The name of Buckner was not a healthy one. Luke coughed, then managed: "Valdez is in town for a reason. You think three men enough protection?"

The banker sat back in his chair and put a confidential glance to the three guards. "That's our business, sheriff," he answered. "Now if you don't mind we have business—"

Luke was about to protest but thought better of it. He realized how the people felt about Jal Crouch and his mob, and how he had owned the sheriff. And he knew it had been gabbed about how he had come to town and immediately saw Jal Crouch and the Crouch's gunslinger, Gruther was now his deputy. And he knew that hell was going to bust loose sometime before the sun went down, and that he was going to be placed in the middle whether he planned it or not.

Luke was aware that Jal Crouch's suggestion of giving up their guns was mere trickery. That the attack to come was more subtle than overpowering the

bank and shooting it out. And now the banker was confident with the guards—and the law was to be left hanging, possibly from a cottonwood.

The banker repeated impatiently, "I said we have business—"

"Seems you ain't anxious for help," Luke remarked.

"Not your kind, sheriff," remarked a hatchet-faced guard who was somewhat older than the other two.

"That's not the point," Luke said. "You're forgetting that I have a duty here, and a little coöperation—"

"Coöperation?" The banker laughed. "For whom?" The banker slapped a hand hard down on the desk. "We'll handle this our way, sheriff. You might be all right, and then again, you may not be. We ain't accusing, but we have to be careful."

Luke moved his shoulders, indifferently, opened the door and walked straight out of the bank. He noticed that the town was beginning to stir like dead leaves lifted against their own will by an early wind. Ranchers were drifting in, singly and in pairs, and the Emporium had already turned on its lights.

He went back to the rear of the jail and the two Mexicans were jabbering away, sober now, but just as loud. There was something wrong about them. He couldn't tell just what—but wrong. He checked the lock and it was secure. He went to the rear door and glanced at the sands on the floor and he felt a stab of muscular tenseness; for that door had been opened and footprints had smeared the fine drift.

He turned and started for the Mexicans when the front door banged open and then the inner door, and Luke was faced by the three guards. Their faces bore trouble with the added stress of mean determination showing in their eyes; the eyes of those who had been out-smarted.

The hatchet-faced one said: "The bank has been robbed of twenty thousand dollars."

So it had come. Luke said quietly: "And I know how it was done. These two Mexicans got out, turned the trick, and came back in. It was a Valdez trick—"

The three shifted their eyes to the prisoners.

"A fine story, sheriff. They've been locked up and now you put the blame on them."

"We see it another way, Bucker," the second guard said. "We see it all with you. You had Valdez and his boys put up their guns. A neat plan. That left you to walk in the bank at closing time, keep us occupied in the office with talk, while a couple of your pals came in, held up the cashier and clerk, bound them and made off, with our not knowing a thing about it."

"What do we know about you," the third one said, "'cept your name's Bucker— 'n that's bad enough."

Luke kept silent. He wanted more details. He needed information badly. The hatchet-faced man added: "We aim to have a little tree-jerking session, sheriff, less we get the money back. The boys'll be coming into town with no money and they can get mean—"

"Fools!" Luke barked. "Valdez will be pulling out of here—"

"We ain't holding Valdez. His boys, except these two here, have been at the saloon all day. Ain't one been at the bank."

Luke was desperate. "All right, then I'm in cahoots with Valdez, and believe me—"

The hatchet-faced man smirked. "Then we got you, and we'll string you—same as they did your dad." Then he raised his rifle in an upward sweep. "Let's have your gun, sheriff." Luke took his gun and threw it to the guard. "Open the

jail and join your Border friends," was the next order.

Luke took his keys and opened the cell and they pushed him in and locked it. The hatchet-faced man motioned to the third guard. "Clem, you hold these keys and watch this crook. We'll scout around and let the boys know what happened." They left the guard to stare at Luke and wince at the Mexican jabberings.

AFTER a few minutes, Clem, the guard, was satisfied and went into the front office. Luke sat down on the bench and tried to think straight. Valdez and Crouch were behind that robbery, that was sure. And the two Mexicans had been let out, pulled the robbery, and came back in. That was sure. But where was the money?

And then the answer flashed in his mind. For Dick, the cashier, had told Reba in the restaurant that he was going to be late. Why was he going to be late? Because he knew about the robbery and his being bound up. Then: Why see her later?

And the other point that had been bothering him about the two Mexicans in the cell. He took a quick look at them. They were wearing their holsters—with guns! And Gruther had taken their guns away from them and laid them on the desk with the keys.

It added up, but how was he going to balance it before the men came in for their money? They could get mean and ornery without their just pay, and a cottonwood with a hempstretch was closing in on another Bucker.

Luke got up casually and watched his cellmates from the corner of his eye. They were jabbering still, making motions, when Luke stepped in and hit the first one on the point of the jaw sending him back against the bars. Luke caught the next one in the stomach, drove in, picked him up and threw him against number

one. With quick, planned movements, Luke snatched the second Mexican's gun, set it hard against the first one's chest and relieved him of his shooter.

A commotion in the front office caused Luke to put his arms behind him, covering the two guns. There seemed to be an argument between the new guard, Clem, and a familiar voice. Then a short shot cracked out.

The inner door banged open and Gruther came charging in, gun smoking in his hand, and the jail keys in his other. He stopped by the cell and grinned at Luke.

"Looks like some ranchers are gonna have your neck trimmed, sheriff," he snickered as he opened the cell. "Okay, you two, you can come out now." The Mexicans came to their feet slowly and started for the door.

"Better get their guns back," Luke snarled.

Gruther's eyes blanked as he did a quick take at their holsters. It was the split second Luke needed. His arms were in front, gun in each hand, as Gruther snapped fire. Luke felt a whine pass his ear as Luke's fire caught Gruther in the chest.

Gruther stumbled and coughed, jerking his body until he jacked double and slammed to the floor. The Mexicans cowered. Luke pushed them back into the cell, dragged Gruther in with them, and locked them up.

Through the open inner door Luke saw Clem stretched out on the floor. The guard's death would be on him too. He opened the back door, stepped out into the fading day and sidled along the outside wall toward the front.

The Emporium was busy, and noisy. And then Valdez's men seemed to spill out all at once, happy and singing, guns back in their holsters, and they were straggling, some not too steadily toward the stalls. A groom brought out a horse

belonging to Valdez, and waited at the saloon for the leader. Valdez came out waving to Jal and his boys.

Attention allowed Luke to get to his horse. He whipped it around in the opposite direction and headed for the hills and where he had met Reba that noon. He saw tracks to the east and followed them. The sun had dipped—and it was cooler—with shadows filling the arroyos. There was a freshness to the sand and mesquite and long streaks of crimson lined the western sky cloaking the mesas in a soft glowering reddish tint.

He reconsidered the tracks. One was light on the road and the other heavier, more recent. First was Reba's tracks and then the hurrying cashier catching up.

The noise from the town was still audible, but it receded with distance. Valdez had not as yet pulled out of town. And that was the first break Luke had had.

Farther on, the trail began to get steep and it narrowed and turned like a lazy snake. Boulders lined the road and the low foothills were stretching their long toes to the trail's edge.

Ahead on the path Luke saw two tiny figures riding leisurely. As he drew closer, careful to keep out of their sight or to be silhouetted against the horizon in case Valdez had started, Luke made out the trim figure of Reba and the stiff riding cashier.

A dark figure streaked across the land, coming at them and angling in to a point of contact. The two stopped as the figure met them. They were apparently being held up. Luke spurred on. As he came closer, keeping at a tangent to the spot of the meeting, Luke saw Reba get off her horse.

THERE was a freezing of movement as Luke was discovered. The interceptor lifted his gun and fired. Luke felt a flush of heat off his forehead. His own

gun snapped the man off his saddle, but he rolled and came up firing. The second shot caught Luke in the arm, but his return set the man still. Dick, the cashier, leaped to Reba's horse and took off wildly.

As Luke came riding up, Reba, looking at him with a bewildered expression, said: "Dick's going the wrong way for help."

Luke looked down at the dead man. He wore a handkerchief over his face but Luke didn't mistake the bushy-eyebrowed henchman of Crouch's. Then he said, quickly: "You better saddle on this hombre's horse. And Dick's not heading to help you. He's heading to meet Valdez. You were carrying the bank's money in your saddle bags."

Reba gave Luke a strange, puzzled look but somehow he felt a warmth in her feeling for him. But Luke didn't have time to chat. He whipped after the fleeing cashier. Reba, mounting the other horse, was soon close behind.

The land took a sharp bend and then sloped down to a valley where frame shacks stood silent against the rim of hills. The cashier rode hard to the shacks, quickly undid the saddle bags and dashed into one of the shacks.

Luke reined out of shooting sight, high on the rim and waited for Reba. Then he said: "The bank's been robbed. I was the scapegoat and you the decoy. Dick had the money put in your bags so they would get out of town without being discovered. Then he was to come up here and fake this robbery. I expect Valdez here any minute."

Luke was down from the saddle and he handed her one of the Mexican's guns. "I'm going down after him. Stay hidden, but keep a watch on anything that might come from that barn behind me."

Reba made a motion. "Please—don't risk—"

Luke looked up at her and he saw what he wanted in those eyes—genuine

worry for him. He felt so much better.

She watched his lean, quick figure dart down toward the low ground and the shacks. He dodged between clumps of mesquite and large boulders. As he reached the flat he slowed up and his protection was sparse. A shot rang out from the shack and splashed rock against Luke's face. Then Luke dashed out.

Reba uttered a sharp cry as she saw Luke stumble into the clearing—a sharp report of fire from the shack—and Luke fell. By the time he fell, she was coming down the slope, riding her horse hard. The shack door opened and Dick stood in the doorway, gun raised. When he saw Reba, he hesitated.

Reba kept coming. She brought up her gun and fired, catching the surprised Dick, spinning him around, as he grabbed for his shoulder. She came up and nearly rode him down. She leveled the gun at him and he dropped his.

Reba dismounted, took his gun, then turned to Luke. He was crawling, getting to his feet, stumbling toward the shack. There was blood reddening his right side. Reba ran to him, steadied Luke and brought him into the shack. Dick was already inside, clutching at his shoulder, pain lining his face.

After Reba had cleaned and partially dressed Luke's two wounds—one from the previous mêlée—the shouting and yelling of Valdez's mob came thundering down from the rim.

Luke spotted the saddle-bags, quickly opened one, saw the money, closed the flap and said: "Reba, take the bags and leave fast. I'll hold them off—"

Reba didn't budge. "I'm staying."

In a frantic movement, Dick dashed for the door, opened it and ran out yelling and waving his hands to Valdez who was still a distance away.

Luke said quietly to Reba: "I'm sorry about this." And he shot Dick as he was half way. The shot broke the advance.

VALDEZ and his boys began to separate, sensing trouble. Their first volley cracked against the door, splintered the windows and screamed death at Luke and Reba. Luke covered one window, Reba the other. They smiled at each other.

"They've got to come at us," Luke said, "we can hold them for awhile."

Another shot whined through the shack. Luke held fire. They were trying to find out how many were in the shack.

Another volley racked the shack and it shivered with vibrations of the sharp-pointed contacts. Luke fired continually and the last he remembered was the smell of hot powder and his gun pumping in his hand.

Luke awoke to a pair of worried eyes looking down at him. He saw Reba watching him and smiling the worry away as he became conscious. He saw the hatchet-faced guard of the Culver payroll, whose eyes set on him, direct, interested.

He felt Reba slide a soft hand over his face and push his hair back. He was on his back, propped against a wall, and he was feeling weak, but the room became

reality and he recognized the men from town.

"Feeling better?" Reba asked. He nodded. He looked at the hatchet-faced man and noticed others around him, stamped with hard-set expressions.

"You got Valdez," the hatchet-faced man said slowly. "And we figured you wrong, sheriff. Just as Valdez left town we checked the jail and found Clem on the floor. Good thing he wasn't dead or we'd a put that on you, too. But the Doc fixed him up and he said you shot Gruther and locked the Mexicans in the jail. Then we figured maybe you were right, so we took out and trailed Valdez. We met our own boys coming on the trail." He smiled. "We got the money."

Luke got up slowly, using the wall as support. Finally he gained enough strength to talk. "Better get back," he managed. "Gotta take care of a certain hombre named Crouch."

"And I have to get back," Reba said crisply, "to take care of a guy." She noticed a shade of gloom shade Luke's face. She grinned. "It's the same guy that's going to take care of Crouch."



November's Novel of the Month

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By
DEBS-SMITH

Rocky tossed the rattles
near the man's shoulder.



DIAMONDBACK BLUFF

ROCKY LANE climbed the dune, hands and knees sinking into the white gypsum, hawk-face set against blistering heat. Sweat, oozing from the granite chisel of his features, stung his eyes and splattered the back of his hands. But he kept going.

The desert had taken its toll. Like a

great, white octopus it had sucked the strength from him, with the moisture of his lanky body. The only sign of the original pursuit he held was a certain wariness that showed in the way he edged forward, a few inches at a time, and in the way he would stop to listen for movement of the man ahead.

**Flaming vengeance goaded fugitive Rocky Lane to the end
of a desert man-hunt.**

Alec Stronge was ahead. Rocky knew. An hour ago he'd caught sight of a splatter of yellow and blue in the glasses he'd thrown aside later as excess baggage. The flamboyant colors—yellow shirt, blue bandanna, made of the finest silk—had kindled Rocky's hatred to white flame and supplied him with this last spurt of energy that would take him to his quarry.

There had been no movement of the big man, so far as Rocky had been able to determine with the aid of the glasses, and Rocky's final splurge of strength had been desperately expended while he breathed both curses and prayers. Death of himself or Stronge would cheat him out of vengeance he'd broken prison to bring upon the big man whose falsely sworn lies had lost Rocky his girl and his freedom.

Half way to the top of the dune, Rocky halted, breathing heavily. Almost unconsciously he fingered the nine rattles and a button which dangled from his belt, while he twisted a thin-lipped smile of bitterness. Then he took up the last weary trudge to the summit.

On top, he squinted along the down-sweep of glistening whiteness to the sandy knoll upthrust beyond. Abruptly his glance came back to the hollow. He caught his breath sharply.

Alec Stronge lay in the middle of the hollow.

Trembling now, Rocky reached his forty-five and brought it up to sight along the barrel. He swallowed once, a dry, painful squeeze of throat muscles against powdery grit. Then he rasped words in deadly quiet. "I've got you in my sights, Alec."

He saw a pudgy hand go suddenly to the bandanna and jerk it aside. Alec's face turned toward him. Rocky was totally unprepared for what he saw.

Instead of lily-white features, brought on by soft living off stolen riches, Alec's countenance bore the mark of the extreme

heat of the sands. His face was sun-blackened, his lips swollen blisters, and his eyes were closed tight against the glare. Alec Stronge was blind!

Vengeance, already tasting sweet in Rocky's mouth, changed to bitterness when he saw what a wreck the sands had left of his quarry. But when Alec spoke it was with the same maddening arrogance that had turned Rocky into a madman in his cell at Santa Fe.

"So," exclaimed Alec with a short, phlegmy laugh, "it is not enough that you break jail and appear in 'Cruces. You pursue me into the sands and all for what, my friend?"

The big man laughed again and flicked the bandanna across his face. Seeing the empty holsters and Alec's serene indifference to the threat of his forty-five, Rocky called: "To fix you as you planned to fix me, Alec. Only there'll be no trip-up here. That jury gave me life sentence instead of a rope as you intended. You planted the evidence in 'Cruces Bank and Trust Company after killing the cashier and taking the twenty thousand. And you lived as a king while I was at Santa Fe, not thinking I'd be able to break out. Well, I'm out, Alec. And I'm here to make you beg before I snuff the worthless life from you."

Alec Stronge gave flippant movement of a hand. The cloth remained over his face. "Shoot and be done," he said disdainfully. "I'm not the beggin' kind. You ought to know that, partner."

Little electric shocks travelled the length of Rocky. How well he knew about the vanity of the big man who had come to his ranch three years before, a penniless tramp, and who had won his confidence until Rocky had made him his partner. Their small spread had joined the white sands and they had shared everything except, of course, Lucille Bronson. Dark-haired, unusually pretty, she had shown preference for Rocky Lane.

EVEN now Rocky could remember that moon-lit night along Tularosa River where cottonwoods lifted giant arms to the sky and where he and Lucille had exchanged whispered vows. And he could remember the next day when Alec Stronge, on learning of their engagement, had shown his true colors.

Vain, jealous, and of a competitive spirit, Alec had vowed to win Lucille's love and to ruin Rocky Lane. Rocky had passed it off as a joke only to learn that Alec had been deadly serious. For the bank holdup had come a week later, then the trial and conviction of himself on circumstantial evidence, then Santa Fe where, after the first month, Lucille's letters suddenly stopped. Instead came the deadly rumors that Alec had bought 'Cruces, lock stock and barrel, including Lucille Bronson.

"You'll beg, damn you," gritted Rocky. "Time was when all I wanted was for you to speak the confession that would clear my name. That was before . . . Lucille's letters stopped and . . . and I had something to live . . ." Rocky broke off to stare hard at the big fellow. "Now," he continued softly, "all I want is to hear you beg."

The thin note of vanity in Alec's laugh swept Rocky like a storm. Alec's voice was taunting. "I was thinkin' we was partners in everything. As it turned out even in the girl. Now we'll be partners in death."

Rocky stared. Self-engrossed Alec could invite death as long as he thought Rocky would share the same fate. Rocky said: "What makes you think that, once I do for you, I can't find my way out again?"

"Because," said Alec quickly, "an hour ago, before I went completely blind, I caught sight of Sheriff Gus Winters and a posse headin' this way."

Understanding struck Rocky. Alec Stronge hadn't stumbled blindly across

the sands because he was waiting for the sheriff.

"So, if you kill me," muttered Alec, "it'll be the rope for you sure. Winters and his deputies will be here any minute."

Rocky said: "Supposin' I don't kill you?"

"Then," replied Alec, "you'll go back to Santa Fe. And I'll go back . . . to our girl."

Rocky's voice became a scream. "Don't mention her name, Alec." There was the click of the hammer being eared back and, for the first time, tenseness caught Alec Stronge. His breathing came jerkily, then he was breathing normally again, a forced nonchalance about him. Rocky thought he could read the fellow's mind.

And because he had known him as only a partner can know another, Rocky saw through Alec now and desperation edged into him. If only he could make Alec beg, make him plead for mercy, there'd be some sense to slamming lead into his conceited body.

Just then he caught movement and, looking up, he saw the bobbing heads of several men above the hogback of sand beyond where Alec lay. Mounted men were riding parallel with the dune and would soon come around it and into the hollow.

Rocky thought, "Which will it be? If I let him off, he'll go back to Lucille. If I shoot, it'll be the rope for me."

And because he thought of her, again there came to him memory of that night under the moon-lit sky and her whispered words, and there came again the battle of faith and doubt of the past month. His hand brushed the rattles and his fingers toyed with them, one by one, and he knew the riders were drawing close.

Then it came to him suddenly as one might ride over a rise and see the landmark of a lighted town on a dark night. He had been doubting Lucille on the word of another, merely on rumors and on the

boastfulness of Alec Stronge. He had condemned her the way the twelve men had condemned him—on circumstantial evidence.

Jerking the rattles from his belt, Rocky held them up for throwing. One glance he shot toward the line of riders, approaching near, then he spoke softly so that only the big man on the ground could hear.

"Listen Alec," he said, "there's a diamondback crawling right up to you, he's in striking distance. Do you hear, Alec? I can shoot him. Do you want me to shoot him, Alec?"

The body became as rigid as a marble statue.

"My price to shoot that snake, Alec," he continued, "is for you to go over every bit of what happened in 'Cruces Bank and Trust Company. Start talking Alec, or I'll let that snake strike you . . . right next to the heart."

Suddenly Rocky tossed the rattles near the big man's shoulder. Alec jerked once at the dry, rustling noise, then he lay perfectly still. He croaked, "don't let 'im get me."

"Then start talking. Now Rocky demanded in a loud voice."

"I done it all," said the big fellow hoarsely. "I . . ."

"Louder, Alec."

Alec's voice lifted to hysterical shrillness. "I robbed the bank. I killed the cashier and planted them rattles which convicted you. I knew everybody had seen you carry them dangling from your belt.

"So I done it but I can't see why you want to hear about it now. Shoot that snake."

THE explosion provoked a small spurt of sand near the big man. Then Rocky was moving down the slope. Before he got there he saw the grim riders draw alongside Alec, and the sheriff dismounted. Handcuffs clicked around Alec's wrists.

"We heard all he said," the sheriff told Rocky. "And it bears out what your girl kept saying all along. She suspected Stronge, even went to work for him to get evidence to clear you. Said she stopped writing for fear Alec would intercept her letters. She's one in a million."

Rocky said: "I know, sheriff, I know." He took a proffered canteen and drank deeply.

Sheriff Gus Winters seemed to be looking for something. His beetle-browed glance swept the ground near where Alec had been lying. He stooped and when he raised up there was puzzlement in his voice.

"These rattles," he said, holding them for Rocky to see, "they look all fired familiar. And . . . where's that snake you just killed?"

Rocky chuckled. "There was no snake, sheriff. I just made Alec think so. Since I saved his life a couple of years back it's the only thing he's been afraid of. A diamondback struck his leg and I sucked out the poison. Then I killed the snake and got his rattles that Alec planted at the scene of the bank robbery and convicted me in the minds of the jury. You saw them at the trail as exhibit A."

Rocky's glance swept the horizon of white as evening breezes rustled sand against his leg. "That snake was after Alec," he mused. "Guess he finally got him."



Powdersmoke gossip had it that cowpoke Andy Pope was set on gunnin' a rustlin' tinhorn—but Andy had no thoughts of a . . .

SALIVATIN' JOB

Andy shucked his slicker, said: "Take your hand off the hardware, Tarrant."

By

RALPH A.
BENNITT



THE door closed quietly and very firmly behind Sally Mae Chandler, and Andy Pope grinned ruefully as he listened to her heels marching down the hall of Jud Chandler's J Bar C ranch-house. That schooling and nurse's training up in Fort Worth had changed Sally Mae. He might not be her first patient but she acted as if a bullet in a cow waddie's leg was going to kill him. Worse, her care had been strictly professional.

"I have to get out of here, Sally Mae," he had been arguing. "Here a month eating your pa's grub, using his spare room, and nothing to show for it."

"Hush, now! You beat off those rustlers, didn't you?" Her tone implied no

gratitude whatever for his lone and useless attempt to save J Bar C stock from being run across the Mexican border.

"Beat 'em off?" Andy almost swore. "I didn't even scare 'em. They got a couple hundred of Jud's cows because I fell off my bronc like any dumb dude from—like a sawbones from Fort Worth."

Sally Mae's blue eyes flashed at that. She went to the window, perhaps to get hold of her temper. A rain had started, and she pulled the sash down almost to the bottom. "The trouble with you men, Andrew Pope, is you don't use your heads. You think there's nothing in this world but punching cattle, fighting, gambling, drinking, smoking, and—and swearing."

"That's right," Andy admitted, and his gray eyes twinkled. Even the way Sally Mae listed a man's rights and privileges, it was a wonderful world.

"As to the doctors I've met, I've found them to be perfect gentlemen. They have minds and they use them."

"Oh." Andy's thick calloused fingers picked at the covers on his bed. He wanted to ask her if she had any special one in mind yet but decided against that. From something her kid brother had said, he was pretty sure what the answer would be.

His round, good humored face held nothing of his worry as he studied the girl he had known most of his life. She looked mighty sweet in that white starched dress but she'd be even prettier in aingham dress slamming pans around a kitchen. A kitchen like Ma's on the Flying P, for instance.

"So," he said, resuming the original argument, "Just send Jimmy in here with my pants and things."

As she went to the door, she said quietly, "Young man, you're going to stay right there in bed another week. Doctor Harden said it would be at least that before you'd be well enough to walk

around this house. Two more weeks before you can ride again."

"Holy Cats!"

Sally Mae pointed to a note on the table beside Andy's bed. "And I sent word to Tom Olney not to write you any more letters. Everything is all right on the Flying P. I sent a note to Mother Pope that you're doing splendidly, and that I'd ride over as soon as Dad comes back, and call on them. Meantime, no excitement for you. Doctor's orders."

"Getting mighty uppity," Andy said to himself when her footfalls had died away. "And you'd better do something about it pretty quick."

There were other things to be done too. Under Andy, Tom Olney was foreman of the Flying P; had been for five years when Old Pete Pope began suffering from rheumatism. Tom had been with Old Pete ten years, and was a man to be trusted, but his short letter made Andy uneasy, because of what it did not say.

WINCING as he sat up, Andy swung his feet around to the coyote skin beside the bed. He had lost much blood and had been through a fever so he was still weak and shaky. The room swung around but he persisted till he was standing at the bay window. From there he could see quite a stretch of southern Texas.

A road cut across Jud's big meadow, running beside a small lake in the middle, to a gap in the hills which led to the little cowtown of Lejos. The Mexican border lay some twenty miles farther to the south. There had been no rustling on that range for five years, but Tom Olney had more than hinted that certain gents were already throwing a long loop. He had mentioned Will Tarrant, the gambler, without actually saying he suspected Tarrant of being the outlaw leader.

A month ago, Andy had heard of Sally

Mae's return to the home ranch to look after Old Jud. Andy was in town the day he got the news but by the time he reached the J Bar C it was sunset. A dozen cowboys he did not recognize were running about two hundred cows from Jud's herd on the lower meadow.

One against twelve isn't good odds in any game but Andy had emptied his handgun at the foremost man, a ranny in a black hat. From that hard-riding hombre Andy had gotten a .30-.30 slug through the upper leg. He had lain out all night and part of the next morning till several of Jud's regular riders had noticed Andy's riderless mare near by.

By then, Andy was in a fever but he understood most of what the men said. Jud had vanished and they knew nothing of where he had gone. "Tracking the bad men to the Mex border," they guessed, and it wouldn't be smart to follow. That morning of the raid, Jud had sent them all to collect strays on the upper range; no one had thought rustlers would come so close to man's house. Without Jud, the men decided to stay close to protect the cows still left.

Sally Mae had spread some light on her father's moves a week later when Andy's temperature went down. Jud had gone into San Antonio to buy some blooded stock which he meant to keep on the lake-meadow. Jud was a man who kept his plans to himself. She wasn't worried about his welfare; she had urged him to take a rest, go as far east as Kansas City.

"Maybe," she told Andy, "he'll see what the outside world is doing, and sell out."

To Andy in his feverish condition, it was all confusing. His father and Jud Chandler had been friends for over a quarter century, living next to each other, fighting together when there was need. On two occasions Jud had saved Pete Pope's life, a debt, Andy figured, which some Pope had to pay. And it was stretch-

ing into the next generation. Certainly, Sally Mae's, tireless nursing had saved the life of another Pope.

Looking down the valley, Andy thought moodily of how he had failed when the pinch came. He was wearing one of Jud's nightgowns and it nearly touched the floor. He wasn't so tall as lanky Jud Chandler but he was round and broad-chested.

It was early October and a warm south wind was bringing the rain. A fine drizzle that might last a week and then switch around to a "norther." But it would bring up yellow grass after a parching summer. Already, the chaparral glistened on the hillsides, and the green meadow was restful to the eyes.

A man riding beside the little lake was hunched over his saddle, and his black slicker gleamed in the slanting sunshine of late afternoon. "Looks like Tom Olney," Andy said, opening the window. He felt better just seeing the quiet-speaking segundo.

"It is Tom," came from below the window. "I've been watching him since he come over the ridge from your place."

Andy grinned as he leaned out. "You still here, Jimmy?"

"Sure, what's a little rain to a cowpoke?" Jimmy was twelve, and the top of his curly head came even with the window sill when he stood up. His hair was chestnut-brown, like his sister's, and his blue eyes were impudent and full of guile. "I heard Sis raisin' h—"

"Chk-chk," Andy said.

"Raisin' Ned, then, if you're gunna be a sissy. You're in love with her. Ya-a-ah!"

"Sure." Andy let out a deep breath. "Who isn't? And what in time can I do about it unless I have some pants to work in. I'll have to catch those rustlers or she won't notice me."

"I getcha." The blue eyes gleamed. "You gunna ride into town an' salivate that Will Tarrant? I betcha he's the

hombre headin' up th gang what 'run off Dad's cows an' tried to steal yourn."

"Tom Olney wrote that he and my boys fought 'em off. It ain't so easy running off Flying P stock. Ground's too rough."

"You're dodgin'," said Jimmy with twelve-year-old frankness. "I ast you was you gunna salivate that Will Tarrant, and you don't answer. You could, I bet. You're as fast as him with a sixgun. Everybody says so even if he is a gambler and has to draw fast sometimes. Besides, he comes out here twice a week to see your best gal, and you don't know no more about what's goin' on than a hog does about Christmas. And—"

"Whoa!" Andy's gray eyes twinkled. "What you got against Will Tarrant?"

"Nothin' much, 'cept last week when I swiped a box of candy he brung out for Sis, he aimed a kick at me and called me a nosey brat. I darn near dumped 'im off'n his bronc when I brung Old Calamity Jane into action, though."

"You stay on my side, Jimmy," Andy begged, knowing "Calamity Jane" to be a fairly deadly sling-shot. "Look. Haven't I showed you how to cut a willow whistle? Didn't I make you a real grass rope? We won't call them debts, though a man has to keep a debt in mind, all right, but if you'll fetch my pants and things, then saddle Betsy, I'll buy you those red cowboy boots you saw in Hedley's store."

"Gee!" Jimmy halted a sudden dash. "How about the old equalizer? You didn't ask for that."

"Be sure it's loaded," Andy said heavily.

Jimmy did his job in everything but finding Andy's Colt .45. Sally Mae had hidden it too well.

The three hour ride to Lejos seemed twice that to Andy Pope, and he was astonished to find it was only nine o'clock when he reached town with Tom Olney. During the ride the taciturn Flying P ramrod had told his boss what he knew of

recent rustling along the border. The drizzle had been in their faces all the way, and Andy was sweating beneath his slicker from warmth and weakness.

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AT ALL DRUG STORES
U. S. and CANADA

He clutched the saddle horn when they trotted past the Ranchers' Hotel. "I reckon I'll get me a room here, Tom."

THE old Flying P ramrod checked his pony and stared. In the dim light from the hotel his hard thin face was shadowed with astonishment. He was six inches taller than his boss, a man in his middle thirties. A rattling good hand on any cow ranch. The three waddies on the Flying P didn't warm up to Tom but they took his orders without arguing.

"I thought," Tom Olney said, "you wanted to—uh—talk with Will Tarrant." He jerked his head toward the Longhorn Saloon a few doors down the street. Several cowpokes were mounting there, and the two Flying P men watched in silence. After a pause, Tom said, "I sent word by one of Jud's boys that you'd be looking for Tarrant in the Longhorn."

"Looking for 'im?" Andy's smooth face wrinkled in pain as he twisted in the saddle. "The way you put it makes it sound like I was out gunning for him."

"Ain't you?"

Tom's sharp question felt to Andy like a slap in the face but he did not answer because doubt lay heavily within him. He breathed deeply trying to get his strength back but he only felt more dizzy.

Olney went on. "They say Tarrant's out to get your gal, for one thing. Another, though I don't throw in with it, is that you told the J Bar C boys that Tarrant is heading up the gang of longriders workin' on this range lately."

"I didn't—" Andy leaned forward in the saddle. "You with me or against me, Tom?"

"I draw my pay from you and your old man, don't I?" Tom shook his bridle and cantered away.

"They say," Andy muttered. "Who in hell are they?"

The four riders recognized Andy and skidded their mounts to a stop. Beany

Little and Mid Middleton, and two others working for Ed Wayne's Lazy W spread. Old Ed's Lazy W began five miles east of town and ran fifteen miles south to the Rio Grande.

The four pumped Andy's hand solemnly, and Beany, a chunky man built about like Andy, said, "The way we got it, Andy, you wouldn't be ridin' for a couple of weeks yet."

"Why you-all leavin' town so early?" Andy asked, ignoring the comment.

"We're ridin' in the mornin'," Beany said harshly, and all four men stiffened. "We don't aim to work alongside the jaspers Tarrant's putting on his Cross T."

"What Cross T? You mean E. Wayne's sold the Lazy W to Tarrant?" Andy whistled but his heart felt heavy. He was going to miss these boys. "Where you-all ridin' to?" he asked gruffly.

"Arizona way, I reckon," Mid said. "The ranges 'round here are goin' plumb to hell what with droughts and rustlers and barb wire and railroads. Pretty soon there won't be no more longhorns in Texas."

"That's how I figger it," Beany said. "Tarrant bought out old Ed pretty cheap. He's payin' cold cash in the mornin', nine thousand for lock, stock, and barrel. You couldn't use four top hands on the Flying P, could you?"

"You boys come right out," Andy said. "Stay as long as you're a mind to. Pa and I ain't got much of a spread but there's a slew of critters back in the hills we got to bring down."

"You're a regular feller, Andy, but everybody knows you're tryin' to do the work of three waddies," Beany nodded to the others as he backed his mount. "We'll drop in on our way and say good-bye to you and your folks."

Feeling downcast, Andy watched the four galloping up the muddy street. "Gosh, what a lot can happen in a month. And

I just haven't got the straight of it yet."

He stabled the mare in Hoke's livery across from the Longhorn Saloon, and then stood out of the rain listening to the sounds coming from the saloon. Will Tarrant didn't own the Longhorn. It belonged to Fritz Kugler, but the gambler must have taken plenty of dinero out of there during the two years he had been in Lejos.

In that time Tarrant had built up a reputation as a whiz at anything he did. He was such a good poker player he didn't have to cheat. He could draw and shoot a tomato can three times in the air. And he was fast with both fists and feet. Once, Andy had seen him snap out his left fist at a mouthy puncher. So quickly had Tarrant struck, few realized what had happened till the cowpoke hit the floor ten feet away.

"Me," Andy said to himself. "What can I do? Especially now." On unsteady legs he floundered across the muddy street wishing he were sure Tarrant was the hombre with the black hat and the .30-.30 rifle that evening a month ago.

A tinny piano stopped on a discordant note when Andy pushed open the batwing doors of the saloon. All talking ceased and a silence lasting thirty seconds was broken only when a nervous dancehall girl giggled. It was a strange reception to the Flying P man. Usually, there were calls to him to join in a game, to have a drink—things which make a man glad he's alive.

A flicker of astonishment crossed Andy's round face when old Ed Wayne looked up and then went back to his bottle. A lifelong neighbor of the Popes, the Lazy W owner was by the back wall drinking alone. Andy swished the water off his big gray hat, put it back, tilted it sidewise, and scratched his blond head.

"Evenin', fellers," he said.

Two punchers he knew well gave him a quiet, "Hi, Andy," and turned away.

WILL TARRANT was shuffling cards to deal out a poker hand to the four men at his table not far from the bar. Tom Olney was standing beside the gambler, and he suddenly took a vacant chair at Tarrant's left. The other four were strangers to Andy.

Tarrant went on riffling the cards while his dark eyes studied the newcomer. A handsome fellow, Andy thought. His face was alert, intelligent, and he was about Andy's height, five feet eight. He was slender without seeming thin, and in comparison Andy felt bulky and slow.

When Andy did not shift his gaze, the gambler got up and walked up to the bar. "Looking for me, Pope?" he asked.

Andy did not answer but the other men along the bar began crowding back. There was a challenge in that question that could mean only one of two things: Andy Pope was going to have to draw his gun or back down.

Andy did not miss the meaning of the easy downward move of Tarrant's hand toward his gun, but a girl had said a man should use his head. Just then, Andy's head felt exceedingly light. The smoke, the quiet in the big room, made him realize he was facing sudden death unless he crawled. Then he remembered his own weaponless belt, and the shame of what that obviously implied made him feel sick.

Slowly, still wondering what to do, he shucked off his wet slicker and let it drop. "You can take your hand off your hardware, Tarrant. I didn't bring mine." He heard the hum of astonishment, but the laughter that came from several men cut deep.

Tarrant's upper lip twitched in amusement as he let his hand drop. He swung toward Tom Olney. "I thought you said this bad man was coming in to salivate me tonight."

"I—" Tom Olney goggled at Andy, then looked at the gambler. "I reckon

there's been a little mistake, Will," he said coldly. He drew his own gun and wagged it at no one in particular. "C'mon, deal. You ain't startin' a fight with a jasper who's about to fall over. He just got out of bed."

"I heard about that," Tarrant jeered. "It's a good way to stay out of trouble unless others figure what's been going on."

"What you mean?" Andy nearly choked on that with the cold feeling he was standing alone. Even Tom was against him. "Ed Wayne, what is this?"

"None o' my doin's, Andy." The grizzled little cowman tilted his bottle and took a long drink.

"What doin's? Spill it!" Andy blared angrily.

"Well," Wayne said, "there's been a lot of stories about you and a gang of owl-hooters at your back. I hear that shootin' on the J Bar C was a windy to make folks believe the skunks stealin' cows lately aren't your own men."

"Everybody," Tarrant added, "knows you ride around alone."

"So that's it." Andy's gray eyes batted, but with the wrath growing within him he felt a new strength. He eyed Tarrant still standing beside the bar, then looked at Tom Olney sitting with the four strange punchers. "Tom," he said softly, "you're fired. Now you can come right out in the open. You started that damfool story about me."

"Sayin' that don't make it so," Olney barked. "Nice pay I get for chasin' them rannies off the Flyin' P. There wasn't many cows to spook, anyhow, so these jaspers took the hint and rode on over the ridge to the J Bar C where you claim you saw 'em."

"You hit anybody?" Andy asked.

"The point," Tarrant broke in, "is that you told a big lie. You said I was at the head of that bunch of long-riders." Andy did not move, and Tarrant laughed as he

unbuckled his gun belt. In three swift steps he came up to where Andy was trying to puzzle things out. "Being called a damn liar don't mean a thing to a Pope, huh? Well, maybe a slap in the face will."

It wasn't a slap but a bewilderingly fast jab to the chin. Andy ducked almost soon enough. His hat was knocked off and he saw stars when Tarrant's fist glanced off the top of his head. He heard a cracking sound and hoped the gambler had broken a bone. A vicious right uppercut raked Andy in the left eye. With blood streaming down his cheek he swung a fist for a leering face that wasn't there.

A smash below the heart made him gasp. He clutched at the top of the bar, hung there trying to get his breath, wondering if his legs would hold him if he let go. The blows came hard and fast, hammering his ears and his back ribs, while from far off came the sound of men yelling.

He didn't know who they were backing but he saw Fritz Kugler's fat moon-face grow grim as he yanked his shotgun from back of the bar.

"Put it way, Fritz!"

Andy thought he was shouting but it was only a whisper. Body doubled, he was sinking slowly when he got a hard boot on the seat of his pants. A hand gripped him by the collar. At that, he turned, flung both arms around Tarrant's middle, and shoved one foot against the front of the bar with the last of his remaining strength.

THE wiry gambler back-pedaled to get his balance but Andy bore onward through sheer weight and desperation. Tables and chairs overturned and broke under them. A terrific crash marked the end of that resistless rush. By that time, thick powerful fingers were about Tarrant's neck, shutting off his wind till he collapsed limply.

"Let 'im up, Andy!" somebody shouted as others tugged at the Flying P man's arms. "You've whipped 'im. Judas, you'll kill 'im if you don't let 'im go."

With blood running down his face, Andy let himself be placed in a chair where he sat breathing like a blown colt. His left eye was shut but he could see men helping Tarrant to another chair, and he saw Tom Olney picking up Tarrant's wallet and some papers which had fallen on the floor. Tom shoved the wallet into the gambler's vest pocket, then stared coolly at Andy.

"He busted a couple of ribs, damn him," Tarrant said breathily. His face was an oyster-gray and wrinkled in pain. "I'll kill 'im for that if it's the last thing I do."

"Not tonight, you won't," Tom Olney growled. "C'mon, I'll help you up to the hotel."

"Yeh, help the polecat, Olney," cried Ed Wayne, so angry he was almost weeping. "Help him clean out of the county, and save his life. By the time his ribs are mended Andy will be a well man again, and I'm a-bettin' two to one he'll take the skunk with either guns or fists."

"Thanks, Ed." Andy straightened in his chair, feeling so glad his throat hurt.

"You stay out of this, you old buzzard," Olney growled, and made a motion as if he were going to cuff the old cowman.

Not at all gently, Andy swung a foot that struck Tom on the knee cap. Olney

leaped back, clawing for his gun. "Damn you, Andy Pope, I'll—"

"Put that down, Olney!" Fritz Kugler roared while his shotgun waved back and forth along the bar. "Git your pal outa here and don't neither of you two skunks smell up this place again."

"Wait a minute, Fritz," Andy said. "I'd like to ask Ed Wayne a question. Ed, did you sign a bill of sale giving the Lazy W to Tarrant for nine thousand dollars?"

"Yeh, and I oughta be horsewhipped. I signed it about fifteen minutes 'fore you come in. He gimme five hundred to seal the bargain. That's why I was fixin' to get drunk. My boys left—"

"Let's go, Tom," Tarrant rasped. "The old coot's made a deal and he can't wiggle out of it."

"He can if that bill of sale hasn't been notarized," Andy said coolly. "Has it, Ed?"

"No." The oldster scratched his gray head. "The deal won't be complete till tomorrow when we sign before the fudge and I get the rest of my nine thousand. But I ain't goin' back on my word. A deal's a deal."

"That's right. Taking that bill of sale away from this jasper would be plumb illegal unless you knew he was planning some skulduggery." Andy settled his bulk when Tarrant began a yell of protest. "Make yourself comfortable, Tarrant, till Doc Harden gets here. It took



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me quite a spell to figure why a successful gambling gent like you would want a cow spread. You'd get your hands dirty—"

"C'mon, Tom," Tarrant grumbled, "I ain't listening to a jasper that's plumb loco."

"The boys," Andy said, "have been losing to you pretty steady but not much. You're good with the cards, and I'd be the last one to say you cheated us."

"That kind of talk don't get you anything," Tarrant fumed. "The next time we meet, come shooting."

"You won't be here, Will," Andy said. "Dealing cards is one way to make a living but stealing cows is a bigger business. And owning the Lazy W would make it easy. From this valley a man can rustle stock to the border right across his own property."

"So you've been rustling, Ed," Tarrant sneered.

"Shut up and listen to Andy," Ed Wayne barked. "We all owe him an apology. A home boy, one of the biggest-hearted gents on this dad-blatted range, and what does he get when he staggers through that door so weak he can hardly stand? A slap in the face from his friends and a beating from you, you dirty card shark!"

"I reckon," Andy droned, "most of my friends heard some gossip they didn't want to believe. A man lying in bed can't hear what's being said about him. What little I heard bothered me because they looked so unimportant."

"Name one of those little things," Tarrant defied.

"Tom, there." Andy was feeling stronger now, and he laughed at the expression on the face of his ex-foreman. "Before I explain that I want to mention something else I've figured. Jud Chandler didn't lose two hundred cows to Tarrant nor to any other outlaw. He hired some cowpokes from San Antone way to

drive the bunch 'way over there for him."

Olney swore. "What's all the shootin' about, then?"

"Jud sold those cows to get cash, then went on up to Fort Worth, or maybe to K. C., to buy some whitefaces. Jud's close-mouthed but I know he's scared of getting hit by another drouth. His lake-meadow always has green grass and it's big enough to support a small herd of blood stock the year 'round."

"Where does that leave me?" Tom asked.

"It leaves you right back on the Flying P, you danged old sidewinder. You used your head, cowboy, which is exactly what a certain party once told me to do."

"Never mind the parables, Andy," Ed Wayne bawled. "How does Tom Olney ring into this?"

"He figured something funny was coming up when he saw those strange punchers Jud had hired, riding across the lower end of the Flying P. It's a short cut from town to the J Bar C. Tom saw Tarrant with these jaspers, and not suspecting then that Will was only trying to hire riders for his new business, he and a couple of my boys opened up. With lead whistling around them, those poor fellers just kept on going over to the ridge to the J Bar C. I happened to be there, and made the same mistake Tom did."

"I saw Tarrant with this bunch," Tom Olney said heavily, "but I didn't savvy what he was up to till I heard he aimed to buy Ed's Lazy W. So I laid up to him, knowin' the boss was shot to pieces. I found out tonight none of the punchers Jud hired wanted to go into the owlhoot business. There's some others—"

"Why, you two-faced—" Sitting, bent over to nurse his hurt ribs, Tarrant suddenly jerked out an ugly two-shot pistol.

ANDY HAD been watching the four strangers from the tail of his eye. They had been edging toward the door,

and he got up when they made a sudden dash.

So already in motion, he dived and struck the gambler on the knees with one heavy shoulder. Tarrant's chair tilted and he crashed to the floor as the bullet smashed through the ceiling. His head struck the floor so hard it shook the building.

"Glory!" Ed Wayne breathed when Andy got up and looked at his unconscious enemy. "If this ain't a lucky day for the Flying P! He'd have salivated both you rannies."

"You still going through with your deal, Ed?" Andy asked.

"Not if he'll gimme back that bill o' sale."

"He hasn't got it." Andy chuckled, looked at Tom who was examining the derringer pistol, then walked over to the Flying P ramrod.

"I'll take it now, Tom."

"Bueno," Tom said, and turned his back on his boss. "For a man lookin' with only one eye you sure can see mighty good."

Andy dipped a hand into Tom's hip pocket, and brought out a long folded paper. "It ain't notarized, anyhow, and that's a lucky thing."

"Gimme that!" Ed Wayne snatched the bill of sale, took a bank check from his vest pocket, and tore both papers into small bits.

They made a white, miniature snow-storm which drifted down onto Tarrant's face. "I swear, Andy, if you ain't the beatinest jasper! How'd you know that paper was in Tom's pocket?"

"I saw 'im pick it up with Tarrant's wallet. And that's why I finally figured for sure Old Tom was with me and not working against me."

"Belly up, gents!" Fritz Kugler roared. "On the house."

"Yippy-ai-aye!" came the answer from

men who sheepishly told Andy they hadn't really believed that story and gossip about him.

A half hour later, Tom Olney drew rein as he and Andy jogged past the hotel. Andy shook his head. "I better keep plugging along, Tom. I meant to stop over night and buy Jimmy a pair of red boots but there's a bed out at the J Bar C I'd better be in, come morning."

"I reckon you better. I'll bunk down with Jud's boys," Tom replied, watching his boss closely.

Andy nodded. Tom was afraid his boss would fall out of the saddle again. It wasn't easy to say some things to the close-mouthed foreman but Andy knew he had it to do. "Tom, you fooled me for a spell tonight. I'm apologizing for doubting you."

Tom chuckled, a rare thing for him. "I'm a better actor than I thought. Tarrant fell for my change in color but your coming out tonight brought the show-down."

"You used your head, feller." Andy said it absently because he was wondering if he could crawl through that bay window without being caught. Probably, not. Sally Mae always brought his supper, and stayed there probably to make sure he ate all of it.

"You might try using your head, yourself," Tom said.

"What you mean?" Hurt, Andy drew rein.

For he thought he had done a pretty good job that night.

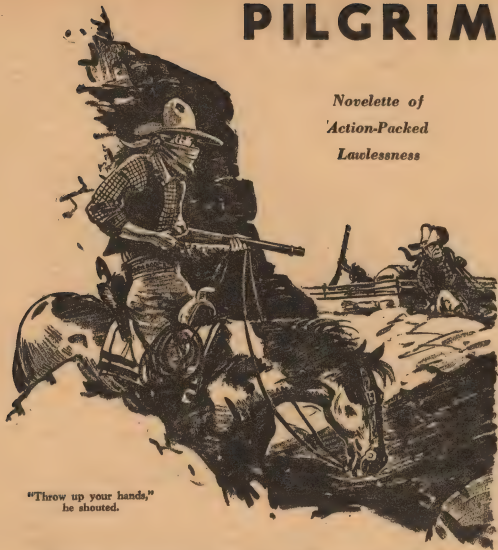
"Did you ever think to tell her you loved her?"

"Golly!" exclaimed Andy, in an amazed voice.

An instant later, Betsy, the mare, felt spurs jabbing her flanks. She shot off into the night carrying a man who had forgotten all about being a doctor's patient.

PILGRIM

*Novelette of
Action-Packed
Lawlessness*



"Throw up your hands,"
he shouted.

There was no choice for young Ed Parker when he rode down the dim owlhoot trail—to become scalp-bait for an Apache war party.

CHAPTER

Owlhoot Trail

1

Langly was stationed as lookout on a small knoll to the north of the stage road. Parker and Bayridge held positions on the blind side of the hairpin turn, Bayridge sitting his horse impassively, now and then rolling brown-paper ciga-

rettes that seemed to burn away instantly between his thin lips. But Parker was more nervous.

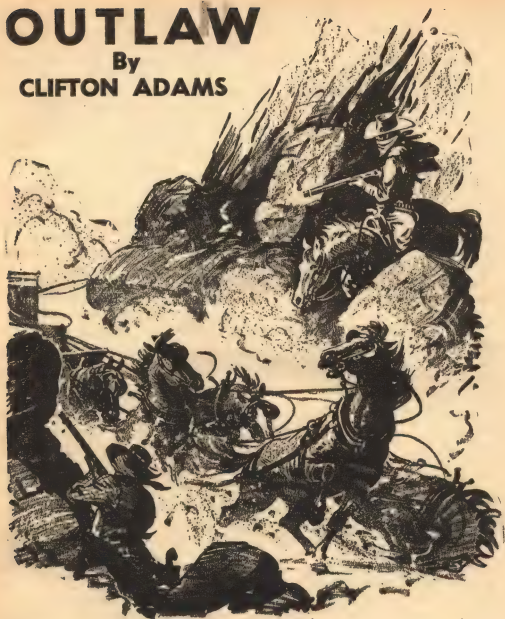
"The stage is late," he said, looking up at the sun.

"It's always late," Bayridge said, "but it always comes."

Bayridge was a soft spoken man; lean, and long of face. He didn't look like a

OUTLAW

By
CLIFTON ADAMS



stage robber or a desperate man, but he was both. He rolled another of his innumerable cigarettes and nodded in the direction of the knoll. Langly was coming down.

He put his horse down the slope carefully, raising only a whisper of powdery gray dust. Bayridge spat away the burned-out end of his cigarette and reached lazily

for his Winchester. Parker, following the man's lead, got his own carbine out of his saddle holster and checked the loading.

Bayridge watched him. "There's nothin' to worry about," he said. "If there's an Army escort we don't fool with it. If there isn't, it'll be easy."

"I'm not worryin'," Parker said. He

rested his carbine across the saddle horn and waited for Langly.

Bayridge was the oldest of the three, but Langly was the boss. Parker had only joined them the day before, and this was his first stage job. It was his first robbery of any kind, for that matter, and he was already wishing secretly that there was a way to back out. But he wasn't fooling himself. It was too late for that now.

When Langly hit level ground he kned his horse and streaked across the brushland to rein up beside the others. "Well," he said, "it looks good. There's no cavalry. I spotted the stage about two miles out in the flat, pacin' easy. You got everything straight?"

Bayridge grunted.

Parker said, "Bayridge shoots the lead horse as they come through the draw, then covers the driver and shotgun guard. I cover the stage on this side while you get the money."

Langly grinned thinly. "You got it down good, kid. See that you don't make any mistakes."

They then took up their position, Bayridge over on the far side of the draw through which the stage was to pass, Parker in like position on the other side, and Langly waiting below. On a signal from Langly they pulled handkerchiefs over the lower part of their faces. They heard the confused drumming of hoofs and the harsh grind of wheels on rock as the stage jolted into the first stretch of the turn. Parker tried to grin. He tried to feel the bravado that he imagined was an intrinsic part of all highwaymen. He only felt empty and sick.

Then, suddenly, the stage was upon them.

The sharp, violent crack of Bayridge's rifle jarred the afternoon. The lead horse lunged crazily and dropped to its knees. The other five horses darted wild-eyed this way and that, turning sharply, drag-

ging the dead horse with them, and doubling back on the stage.

Bayridge appeared on the other side of the draw. "Throw up your hands!" he shouted. "Stop them damn horses!"

The driver was fighting to brake the stage. The abrupt reversal of the horses had thrown the shotgun messenger from his seat and sent him rolling onto the baggage rack behind. Parker nudged his horse forward and rode to the edge of the ridge, his carbine leveled on the stage. He saw at once that everything had gone perfectly. The driver was helpless. By the time the guard stopped rolling he was covered with rifles from three sides.

"Stay that way," Bayridge drawled, "and there won't nobody get hurt. Just throw your hardware over the side and we'll go on about our business."

Guns thudded to the ground, squirting up little puffs of gray dust. Then Langly came forward on foot, throwing the stage door open and ordering the passengers out. Two men got out first, men in city clothes who looked like drummers of some kind. The next and last man was a young cavalry lieutenant.

Parker held his breath. Soldiers were bad, even as passengers. This one was young—not more than twenty-one, Parker figured—probably just out of officer's school back East, and, more than likely, heading for Lordsburg to join an Indian fighting outfit. His face screwed up peevishly as he got down from the stage, his dress saber clanging and rattling against a yellow striped leg. His handtooled leather holster held one of Colonel Colt's finest, the new long-barreled .45 that had only recently been issued to the cavalry.

Langly said, "Just unbuckle your belt, Lieutenant, and I'll relieve you of that shooting equipment."

The young officer glowered, not moving. Then, as Parker watched, dumb with shock, Langly raised his rifle and shot the lieutenant through the head.

"It looks like some people have to learn the hard way that I mean business," Langly said. "You, driver, throw down that strong box."

THE driver then threw the box down, quickly. The two drummers stood frozen, unable to move or make a sound. With business-like calm Langly got the lieutenant's gun, shoved it in his waistband, then he went around and cut the dead lead horse away. "I reckon that's all," he said to the driver. "Now get this hack out of here."

There had been nine hundred dollars in the strong box, about half of it gold and the rest in government paper. They divided it on the spot, Parker taking his dumbly, feeling an awful sickness growing in him. He wondered if he would ever be able to close his eyes and not see the lieutenant's dead face.

They rode all night that night, because they knew the cavalry would be on their trail minutes after they learned of the lieutenant. Their intention had been to bear straight south, making the border of the New Mexico country in two or three days, and then into the sanctuary of Chihuahua. But, unexpectedly, they encountered cavalry heading east from Camp Huachuca. They had to cut back then and ride westward into the Arizona country, all the way to the banks of the San Pedro before Bayridge's horse pulled up lame and forced them to stop.

"You've gone and played hell now," Langly said angrily.

Calmly, Bayridge got down from the saddle and inspected his horse's hoof. "Threw a shoe somewhere," he said mildly. "The hoof's split." He rolled another of his cigarettes and looked around. "Well, we needed to stop anyway and think things over."

"What's there to think about?" Langly demanded.

Bayridge took out a long-bladed pocket

knife and began trimming the hoof. "We've got soldiers behind us," he said, "and Indians in front of us. We can think about that for a while. Anyway, it won't hurt to let our horses blow."

Langly didn't like it, but they couldn't travel with a lame horse. That night they pulled back a piece from the river, in a clump of cottonwoods and made camp. They took turns staying awake, keeping ears alert in the darkness, listening tensely for unusual sounds in the night that might mean Apache, or cavalry. Parker's watch fell at midnight. He felt Bayridge shaking him, and he sprang upright throwing off the saddle blanket that he had used for cover.

"It's all right, kid," Bayridge said softly. "Nothin' stirrin', but keep your ears open just the same."

The man got his saddle and blanket and bedded down. Parker got his carbine, went over and sat beneath a cottonwood and listened. They had picketed their horses about a half a mile down the river—you could depend on men to sleep quietly at night, but you never knew about horses. In Apache country you couldn't be too careful.

Parker knew about Apaches—he thought of them and stared bitterly into the darkness. Until a year ago they had had a little homestead farm up by the Gilla river, the three of them, Parker and his Pa and Ma having come down from Missouri the year before to try to get a fresh start on free government land. That was about the time Geronimo and his warriors broke out of their stronghold in the Dragoons and swarmed over the southeastern part of Arizona, killing, looting.

It had been a sharp, crystal-clear day in spring. Parker wouldn't forget that day. Down in the dry wash where he had been gathering brush for firewood the sloping sides were startling green with gramma grass, and the air had the heady wild smell of crushed mesquite and grease-

wood. About noon he got the wagon loaded and started back to the farmhouse, driving an aged mule and a young wild range colt that he had caught and broke himself, the only farm animals they had. And then, about a mile from the house, he heard them.

A sickness caught him as he remembered the sound of insane yelling. Carried by the wind, the sound was a far away shimmering ribbon of horror punctuated by the rapid firing of rifles. He had stripped the harness off the range colt and forced him brutally across the rugged, boulder-strew flat. But he had reached the house too late. It was burning by the time he got there. He still had a scar across his shoulders where the timber fell on him as he dragged his parents outside to the yard—too late to save them.

That had been a year ago. So he had a homestead farm but nothing to work it with. No money, no equipment, not even any credit. Soon afterward he left the farm, drifting from one place to another, finally winding up in Lordsburg with a job. It wasn't a job with a future. He had been looking for something else, anything, when Langly and Bayridge made him the proposition.

But now he had three hundred dollars. It was the most money he had ever had. The most he had ever seen, for that matter, outside of gambling houses. But it wasn't going to do him much good unless he lived to spend it. Unless he could get the dead lieutenant's face out of his mind.

THE night passed without incident.

Parker guessed that they had lost the cavalry. And the Apache hadn't spotted them yet. That morning Parker went down to the river for water—they decided it would be all right to boil some coffee if they kept the fire small and watched the smoke. He tied the opened canteens to the end of a rawhide riata and flung them out into the sluggish stream. After a

moment he felt the weighty tug that told him they were filled, and he began pulling them in. That was when he noticed the movement upstream, near a bend in the river.

Parker jerked back suddenly, dropping the riata and diving for the carbine at his feet. In a fleeting glance he saw that the intruder wasn't a soldier or an Apache warrior, as he had feared, but a scrawny, leathery old geezer who was making his way slowly across a cottonwood log that lay across the stream.

Parker began to breathe again. He pulled the canteens in carefully, then stepped back behind a clump of cholla, watching. The old man hadn't seen him.

Then, as Parker watched, the old man began to teeter. He swayed far over to one side, clutching an old-fashioned long-barreled rifle in both hands. Suddenly he lost his balance completely and plunged headlong into the water.

Parker grinned slightly at the low comedy. The old man let go of his rifle and snatched at the battered Confederate infantry cap he wore, then he went under.

Parker stood stunned. He had expected the oldtimer to slash at the water and swim to the bank, wet and cursing perhaps, but no worse off than that. But he didn't come to the top. Water closed over him, surging restlessly for a moment, and then it began to settle glasslike where the old man had gone under.

Suddenly Parker was running, tearing at his buckskin shirt, pausing for a moment on the river bank to pull off his heavy boots. He dived, slicing cleanly into the water, and icy coldness closed around him.

He found the old man, still thrashing weakly below the surface of the river. Parker grabbed the loose clothing about his shoulders and kicked viciously, propelling them both upward. The old man's heavy boots and sodden clothes dragged like leaden weights, but at last they broke

the surface and Parker gulped clean, cool air. Then, with one arm over the old man's chest, Parker started paddling toward the bank.

The oldtimer was limp, sagging heavily, as Parker pulled him ashore and started pressing water from his lungs. After a time the old man's eyes came open, and he cused explosively. Then Parker knew he was all right.

"What in hellish damnation you think you're doin'!" he coughed. He rolled over on the bank, and after a moment he sat up.

"You drank too much river water," Parker said. "I was pumping some of it out of you."

The old man looked around. He inspected his own and Parker's sodden clothing, and finally he got it straight in his mind. He said between fits of coughing, "I reckon I did at that. So you fished me out, hey?"

Parker grinned. "That's right, oldtimer." He took his pants off and wrung the water out of them. The old man didn't bother with his. He found a twist of water-soaked tobacco and took a bite. He studied Parker thoughtfully as he chewed, his eyes not suspicious yet, but they would be if Parker didn't offer a good explanation for being here.

He said, "It's a good thing you was here. I didn't see you though. Or hear you. Before I dumped in the river."

"I learned to move careful," Parker said. "When the Apache is around."

The old man spat and wiped his mouth. "Nothin' to be feared of here," he said. "Injuns don't show in this part of Arizona. Too close to the army."

Parker wondered quickly if they had been riding in circles. He said, "How close to the army?"

The oldtimer studied. "About ten miles to the north," he allowed, rubbing the gray bristle on his chin. "Eight from my shack," he went on. "I've got a little place

upstream a piece. Homestead." He paused, still waiting patiently for an explanation.

Parker said the first thing that came to his mind. "I'm a prospector," he said. "Me and a couple of partners made camp here for the night." He might as well tell him about Langly and Bayridge now, he would find out anyway, prowling around the river.

"Gold's where you find it," Parker said. He wanted to get away before the old man asked questions he couldn't answer.

The oldtimer's curiosity seemed to be satisfied. He got up and shook himself. The bath and near-drowning hadn't seemed to hurt him any. He appeared to have forgotten it. "Well, good luck to you," he said doubtfully. "I better mosey. My cow critter broke pasture last night. I been lookin' for her." He strode off minus his infantry cap and long barreled rifle, water making squashing sounds in his boots as he walked. He looked back once. "Glad to have your company," he said. Then he added, "I don't think you'll find no gold here, though."

CHAPTER

2

A Fool's Mission

Langly didn't like it when Parker told him what had happened on the river. He especially didn't like the part about the army post. He spoke to Bayridge. "Is your horse ready to travel?"

"Travel," Bayridge said. "But not fast and not far."

They were ready to try it anyway. The country was getting too crowded. Even if the soldiers didn't run across them, sooner or later, the old man would hear about the three desperados and begin putting two and two together. They were tying on their saddle rolls when they saw the old man coming up from the river, heading in their direction.

Langly cursed, but Bayridge took it

philosophically. "It won't do to go now," he said. "If he sees we're on the run he'll have the cavalry on our trail before sundown."

Purposefully, Langly took the new .45 out of his waistband. Bayridge said sharply, "Don't be a fool. This is no time to raise a fuss."

Langly looked around angrily. Bayridge had been giving too many orders lately and he didn't like it. But, reluctantly, he put the pistol away, seeing that the man was right. Parker saw slow fire catch behind Langly's eyes, Bayridge saw it too, but it didn't seem to bother him. He calmly rolled a cigarette as the oldtimer drew closer.

He seemed to be in a hurry, taking broken-gaited little hops and skips now and then, skirting clumps of cholla and flowering weeds. By the time he got to the cottonwoods where the outlaws waited, he was pretty well out of breath.

"It looks like I told you wrong," he said, looking at Parker. "I found my old cow, down the river a piece—what was left of her." He stopped for breath. "She'd been shot and butchered," he went on.

Parker stiffened. "Apache?"

The old man nodded. "That's what it looks like." He watched the three men. Uneasiness showed behind Langly's eyes. Bayridge frowned slightly but that was all. Langly said tightly, "How do you know it was Apache?"

"I don't know," the old man said. "It's just a guess, but a pretty good one, I figure. Good enough to have the cavalry boys look into it."

Instinctively, Langly's hand touched the butt of his .45. He didn't mean for the old man to take his story to the cavalry or anybody else. But the movement stopped abruptly as the oldtimer brought a lump of rock out of his pocket, bounced it in his hand for a moment, thoughtfully. Then suddenly he pitched it to Parker.

"You're a prospector," he said. "What

do you make of it? Is it worth anything?"

Parker caught the stone, rolled it in his hand, staring at it. The sun caught the gleam of deep mineral stains in the rock. A man didn't have to be a professional prospector to know what it was. It was silver. Rich silver. Ore like that would run a thousand dollars a ton, maybe more. Parker stared at the old man. Then he stared at the dark hills along the river—hills of silver!

Parker found it hard to believe. But he had the proof in his hands. Bayridge held out his hand and said, "Let's have a look, kid." He handled it carefully, almost lovingly, then, silently he handed it back to Langly.

Instinctively, Langly's gaze darted toward the distant hills. There were riches there that couldn't even be guessed at. The three of them agreed on that. Mutely. Suddenly Langly tossed the stone back to the old man.

"It's nothing," he said.

The old man caught the rock. "I had an idea it might be silver," he said.

"Fool's Silver," Langly said uneasily. "It's worthless."

The old man's mouth dropped. He rubbed the piece of ore with his thumb. At last he put it back in his pocket. "Well, it don't make any difference anyway," he said. "If Apache's up there." He turned abruptly and strode away.

Langly made a sudden move for his gun, but Bayridge said, "Let him go."

"You're crazy," Langly said. "He'll make straight for the army post to tell them about us."

Bayridge smiled and shook his head. "We might wish he would," he said. "But he won't." Bayridge was staring quietly, almost dreamily, to the south. A fluffy ball of white smoke seemed to spurt up against the blue of the sky. Then it rose lazily, rolling, tumbling, as another puff of smoke followed, came spurting up behind it.

PARKER and Langly watched, frozen.

It was smoke signals. Apache signals. Dot-Dot-Dash. The puffs of smoke kept coming, forming a coded message. Bayridge idly rolled a cigarette and licked it. "We don't have to worry about the old man," he said. "Apache will take care of him."

"And us along with him," Langly said tightly.

Bayridge shrugged. "Maybe. Parker knows Apache. What do you think, kid?"

Parker considered more calmly now. "There's a chance that they haven't spotted us," he said. "More likely they've got their eyes on the old man and his livestock. They'll hit and run before he can get to the cavalry."

Langly's relief was audible. "Well," he said, "that's all right." He looked quickly at the other two, and Parker saw what he was thinking. It had been in his own mind. If the old man didn't put his claim on that ore deposit, then the three of them were the only ones who knew about it.

Parker said, "Mexico's out. If we ride south Apache will spot us for sure."

"And if we ride north it's the cavalry," Bayridge drawled.

"We're not ridin' anywhere," Langly said. "We're stayin' here, with one eye on them hills, and the other on the old nester to see that he doesn't spread the word about his strike." He turned to Parker. "That's goin' to be your job, kid. Ride back to the north and keep a watch on the old man's farm. See that he doesn't leave it. If Apache doesn't stop him—well, I guess you know what to do. You've got a carbine."

Parker didn't like it. He didn't like riding out of the timber while Apache was around. A million dollars in silver would be nice, but not if you had to have your scalp lifted. But he didn't argue with Langly.

It was almost sundown when he sighted

the old man's shack. He had left his horse behind and made his way on foot. He reached a small rise, his shirt ripped and torn by the needlesharp thorns and cholla that he had crawled through to get there. And down below was the shack, a small affair made mostly of rock and sod, with some odds and ends of pulpwood lumber. The stone chimney was cold and smokeless and the house was strangely silent.

Quickly, Parker wondered if the old man had already started for the cavalry post. But then he realized that he wouldn't have a chance of making it in daylight without Apache seeing him and stopping him. The old man would have known that and wouldn't have tried it.

Silently, Parker cursed Langly for his being here. Then, suddenly, a thought struck him—a thought that strangely had not occurred to him before. Maybe Langly had planned it all. Maybe he had meant for Apache to spot him on this fool's mission. That way there would be one less person who knew about the silver. It would only leave Langly and Bayridge to share the riches—and, Parker thought grimly, maybe Langly even had plans for Bayridge.

He lay there wondering bitterly what to do. The low sun splashed gold on the old man's shack below. Towering green and yellow mesal plants rattled like dry bones, their explosions of white blooms bobbing and waving in a slight breeze. Somewhere on Parker's right a wild turkey gobbled. He stiffened. There was an answering gobble from down the slope somewhere. Then, as Parker watched the far side of the ridge, a bronze body reared up in the dusk.

Parker didn't breathe. The Indian stood boldly outlined against the deep green of cholla below. He stood sniffing, looking, as Parker pressed himself to the ground. Parker could almost feel the Apache looking around him, over him, through him—but not at him.

The last rays of the sun caught the brown body, etching it sharply in detail. The warrior stood naked except for a loincloth and shapeless, knee-high boot moccasins. There was a filthy white turban wrapped around his head, a drooping eagle's feather in his black hair, and in his arms he fondled a shiny new Winchester. After a moment he raised his arm, and the far side of the slope became populous with crawling movement.

THERE were ten or a dozen of them, Parker guessed, but he couldn't be sure because the light was failing sharply. They took their places on the lip of the ridge, looking down on the cabin, as still and silent as stone.

It was almost funny, being that close to the Apache, watching them and knowing that they knew nothing. But it wasn't funny to imagine what would happen if he should show himself. He lay there clutching his carbine, and suddenly it was dark. No lights showed in the cabin, but Parker knew that the old man was down there. And the Apache knew it. The night is sacred to the Apache, their god frowns on murder after darkness. But by dawn, in the first light of day, it was all right. They would wait until then.

Parker wondered if the old man would make a run for it. If he didn't Parker would have a first class view of the massacre. All he had to do was lay here silently until morning. He smiled grimly, without humor. Langly was going to be disappointed to see him get out of this alive.

The night dragged on. There was no movement around the cabin. Parker guessed that the old man was going to wait and fight it out. His leg began to cramp from staying in one position so long. Parker rolled over, carefully, and straightened his leg. His foot hit a small stone and sent it rolling. He held his breath, waiting tensely.

Sure enough, the turkey gobble sounded again. Parker couldn't imitate it. He couldn't answer. He could only lay there and wonder if Apache was getting suspicious. He didn't have to wonder long. A stealthy whisper of movement caught his ear. It was coming toward him.

There was only one thing to do; to get out of there. And there was only one way to go. His retreat was cut off. He could feel the Apache coming up behind him to inquire into the strange sound. That left straight ahead as the only direction to make for.

He slithered on his stomach at first, but as he felt the Apache close in he got to his knees and began crawling. At last he reached the bottom of the slope. He got to his feet then and ran across the clearing toward the shack.

The door was barred on the inside. Parker shouted hoarsely, but there was no answer. He took off his hat, put his fist inside it and smashed it through the cabin's window. A glass window that the old man had probably imported all the way from St. Louis, but it couldn't be helped. Quickly, Parker brushed out the jagged edges and climbed in. He looked back and the ridge was still and quiet as it had been before. The Apache hadn't followed him—they had him where they wanted him.

He looked around the cabin. It was thick with darkness, and there was still no sign of the old man. Parker called "Oldtimer. . . ."

A sound answering him, a kind of moan, Parker thought. He followed the sound, feeling his way along the sod wall. He bumped into a table, and then a bed. And that was where he found the old man.

He said, "You better look smart, old man. Apache's watching you from the ridge."

He got a feeble curse for an answer, and only then did Parker realize that the old man was hurt. His eyes were becoming accustomed to the darkness, but he

couldn't see enough to do anything. He kicked the table out of the way and pulled the wooden bunk over by the window.

"Get out," the old man said weakly. "Before mornin'. They'll be comin' then."

In the moonlight Parker saw that it was his shoulder. He had been hit by an arrow.

Parker said, "Hold still. You've got a couple of holes that need plugging."

He fumbled about the room until he found a blue cotton shirt, not very clean but it would have to do. He tore it into strips and bound them tightly about the shoulder. At least it stopped the bleeding.

"I'm a goner," the old man said. "Get out while there's still time."

CHAPTER

3

One Good Turn

Parker sat on the bunk. It seemed like good advice. He had done all he could do for the oldtimer, and there wasn't any use of both of them staying here to be massacred. But he stared out at the dark ridge, not moving. He had saved the old man from drowning, only to have him killed by Apaches. It all seemed rather useless. He forgot that he had come here in the first place to make sure that the old man was dead.

He said suddenly, "Is there a doctor in this country, old man?"

The oldtimer looked at him for a long while. "Sure," he said flatly. "At the army post."

That settled that. A doctor might be able to save him, but Parker couldn't go looking for a troop of cavalry—even if Apache hadn't been out there.

"Have you got any whiskey?" Parker said.

"Over by the wall, where the bunk was. Light the lamp while you're at it. And bring me pencil and paper, it's there by the washstand."

Parker hesitated about the lamp, and then decided that it wouldn't make any difference. Apache knew they were here anyway. He held a match to the wick, replaced a smoked chimney, and the room flared in yellow light. He brought the crock jug over and let the old man swig from the neck.

"Drink it down," he said. "It won't hurt so much."

Then he found the pencil and paper. He watched curiously as the old man propped the tablet on his knees and began scribbling with his good hand. The effort cost him. He lay back, weak and very pale.

"What was that for?" Parker said.

The old man raised his eyes, grinning slyly. "What's your name?"

"Jones," Parker said. Maybe the old man had guessed that he was one of the outlaws.

"Your real name, dammit," the old man said.

Parker hesitated. Then he said, "Ed Parker." If it was a note to the cavalry commander he could destroy it.

The old man said, "That's better," and set the name down on the paper. He looked up. "Not exactly legal, maybe," he said, "but it'll hold up. You saved my life once. I'm deedin' half of everything I have to you."

And, in payment, he expected Parker to get to the cavalry in time to save him. But he didn't say it, except with his eyes. Parker said, "I'm sorry, old man. I had a homestead farm once. I don't want half of another one."

The old man started to laugh, but his face twisted with pain and turned to coughing. Parker felt sorry for him, but there was no way he could help. The least he could do was tell him the truth. A dying man had a right to hear that.

He said, "I'm not really a prospector, old man, the way I told you."

The old man said, "I knowed that from the first."

"I'm an outlaw," Parker said. "I can't get you any help because I'm wanted by the army."

"I knowed that, too," the old man said. "Guessed it anyway." He lay for a moment, panting. "Your partners. What about them?"

"They're not my partners any more. Apache will have my scalp by sunup, thanks to them."

The old man smiled thinly. "There's a dry wash behind the shack. Maybe them damn redskins ain't watchin' there." He closed his eyes wearily. Parker blew the lamp out and plunged the room into darkness again. After a moment he said, "Anything you want, old man?"

There was no answer, no sound.

Time was becoming precious. Parker felt of the pulse in the oldtimer's throat. He was still alive. Whether or not he would be alive when the sun came up was problematical. It would be better if he wasn't, Parker thought grimly.

Outside, he went on his stomach again until he found the dry wash that the old man had mentioned. He squirmed snake-like through thorned clumps of cholla, not letting himself think of the old man who lay dying back in the cabin, not letting himself think of anything except the Apache waiting up there on the ridge for the sun to come up so they could go on with their murder. By sunup he had to be a long way from here. That was all he let himself think about.

When he reached the wash he stopped for a moment to get his plans straight. Mexico . . . maybe he could make it. Alone and on foot, but wise to the way of Apache, there was a chance. If he could work his way east to civilization maybe he could start all over again. But he wondered if it would be worth it.

ABRUPTLY, he cradled his carbine in his arms and started crawling, slowly at first. He looked back once and

saw the cabin standing in awful loneliness in the pale moonlight. He threw caution away, got to his feet and ran.

There was no way of knowing how far or how long he ran. He followed the wash until it played out, and then he took to the open country, dodging scattered boulders and breaks on the land when he could, but sometimes running over them blindly.

At last he settled down to a loose-hipped, ground-eating lope, and his breathing became more regular and it was better for a while. But then his legs became numb with fatigue, seeming to move of their own volition as things apart from the rest of him. The race took on a nightmarish quality. Daggered weeds slashed at him and he no longer bothered to dodge them. He looked up emptily. The sky was growing lighter, the stockade wall appeared suddenly. Parker ran toward it, his legs moving automatically. A sharp voice shouted, "Halt!" but he kept running until he reached the closed gates of the fort, and only then did he stop.

"Mister, you take some awful chances," the guard said. He was standing spread-legged, the muzzle of his long carbine almost against Parker's chest. Parker couldn't speak. He had to get air into his lungs, to wait for his heart to stop pounding. Parker looked up at the sky and was glad to see that it was still dark.

It was a long time later that Parker began to think calmly again. He sat in the Commandant's office, a raw-boned, mustached cavalry major looking across the desk at him. A first squad of Cavalry had already formed and was riding south toward the old man's cabin.

"Now let's start over," the major said.

His voice was becoming sharp with impatience. For several minutes he had been asking questions, and Parker had been answering too vaguely to suit his military sense of correctness. With an effort he brought his voice down to a calm conversational level again and said, "Don't think

we don't appreciate the trouble you went to. But there are certain precautions that have to be taken, even in cases like this. For instance, there are three outlaws in this country somewhere. Killers. How do I know you're not one of them?"

Parker said tightly, "Would I show up at a cavalry post if that was the case?"

The major tapped his teeth thoughtfully. "That's what I was wondering," he said.

Outside, a second squad of cavalry was forming on the drill ground. Vaguely, Parker heard the shouted commands, the restless shuffle of horses and equipment, but in the front part of his mind he was thinking that it was all over. It was only a matter of time until the major got the truth. He was already suspicious.

Well, Parker thought, it didn't make much difference. He hadn't realized until now how tired he was of running and hiding. Maybe that was the reason he had come to the cavalry, knowing that he would be caught, because he was tired of running. Or maybe it was because of the old man. Somehow, if he could save the old man's life, maybe that would in some way make up for the lieutenant that

Langly had killed. He hoped that it could.

The major shouted suddenly, "Orderly!" and almost instantly a heavy-eyed trooper appeared in the doorway. "Get two horses saddled immediately," the major said. "We're riding out with the second squad."

The major smiled thinly. He wouldn't bother asking more questions. The old man himself could tell him the answers, if he was still alive.

The second squad was almost a mile from the cabin when the sky began to pale. They heard the sudden spatter of rifle fire, muffled by distance. And then it was quiet. The first squad had left their horses back away and had posted themselves on the lip of the dry wash behind the old man's cabin. When Apache had made his charge in the first light of dawn, they had been ready.

THE yard was strewn with bronze bodies when the second squad arrived. A lieutenant still carrying a long-barreled .45 in his hand came up to report.

"Sixteen of 'em, sir," he said saluting.

The major nodded. "Take your squad up in the hills and look around. Send out



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a detail to round up the horses. How's the old man?"

"I don't know, sir. The doctor's with him."

The old man was still alive. The doctor was bending over him as Parker and the major went inside.

"He's tough as rawhide," the doctor said, looking up. "With proper care he'll pull through. Probably to be a hundred."

"Can he talk?" the major said.

The old man answered with a weak curse, and Parker grinned in spite of himself. But the grin went away. A trooper appeared in the doorway.

"Sir, first squad reports two white men found in the hills. Both dead. Apache got 'em; there's not much left to identify, but they had government paper and gold in their saddle bags. The lieutenant figures they're two of the outlaws we're lookin' for."

The major looked sharply at Parker. "There were three horses," the trooper added. "I guess we'll find the other one before long, sir."

The major said dryly. "We've already found him. Put this man under guard."

The old man stirred in his bed. He turned his head slightly, looking at them. "Hold on there, dammit," he said weakly.

The major said, "This man's the third outlaw. It won't be hard to prove. Maybe he saved your life, old man, but doesn't take him off the Army's wanted list."

The old man looked at Parker, for a long while. "Bosh!" he said feebly. "The man's my partner. Has been for a week."

The major's grin widened. "A handy alibi if true. But it isn't true. A week ago this man and two others held up a stage and killed a cavalry lieutenant."

"Bosh!" the old man said again. "Look at the deed."

For the first time Parker became aware of the paper that the old man had given him.

"All right, mister," the major said. "Let's see it."

Parker knew that it would be of no help. The old man had only written it the night before, and the robbery had taken place a week ago. He felt the old man's eyes on him as he drew out the paper. He shook it open and looked at it before handing it to the Major. He took a sudden, sharp intake of breath.

The old man's signature was there—but something more important was the date. Quickly, Parker counted days in his mind. This was the tenth of June. But the date of the paper was June 3, 1878. It took a second for it to hit Parker. The old man had deliberately misdated the paper to make it look like he had been here signing a deed on the day the robbery took place. He looked up, and the old man was grinning.

It was almost noon when the last of the cavalry rode back toward the fort. Parker stood wearily in the doorway, watching them go, wondering why the old man had done it. At last he went back inside and stood beside the bed, looking down at him.

Almost desperately, Parker said, "I don't get it. To save me you stick your neck out for the Army to take a whack at. Why?"

The old man snorted. "You never really killed nobody, did you?"

"No."

He closed his eyes then and began talking quietly, almost as if to himself. "I had a son once," he said. "He got killed in an infantry charge back in Virginia—Confederate infantry. I guess I never got used to bein' alone here, so I'd be proud to have you stay if you took a mind to." Then he opened one eye. "We might have another look at that silver ore sometime—even if it is just Fool's Silver."

Ed Parker grinned at the oldtimer and knew his running and hiding days were at an end.

**When drifter Brett Carteret was forced into a nester's showdown
he took one long-shot chance—on a man marked for death.**

IT WAS Brett Carteret's daily custom to return from his solitary ride in the late afternoon and spend the hour before supper in an interested, though aloof, contemplation of the town. After two weeks of this, the growing ugliness was as clear to him as if he had lived out the thirty-two years of his life in this one place. Trouble had this town in its grip.

Brett knew the story of the town, but the town knew little of him beyond the

tact that he went by the name of Carteret, that he was in Sig Arno's place each night following the trade of the professional gambler and that he was dogged by a run of bad luck.

Because he was an enigma, the town speculated on him, and because the strong, sharp smell of trouble hung in the air, Carteret speculated on the town. A man would hang tonight, he reflected, a home-steader tried for murder in a cowtown.

LOSER'S STAKE

By
**GERRY
DAY**



Until this moment, Brett had shown no interest in the trail of Sandrich, the nester, but now, as the sorrel gelding brought him into the crowded street, he knew, with surprise, that the jury was taking longer than expected with its decision.

The horses at the tie rails read like a roll call of the big brands; the ragged cluster of homestead families clung together near their wagons. In front of Sig Arno's place, Dutch Evers was haranguing his Star-Cross crew, a truculent group out for revenge. It was one of their number that had been shot by Sandrich.

Then, all of Carteret's attention was caught and held by the girl who sat tensely atop a spring wagon, a girl whose hair was midnight black and whose eyes were lightning blue and filled with scorn for the thing that was happening here. This was Rebel Sandrich, out of the old south, soldier-straight, waiting to know whether or not her father would hang for protecting her from a drunken puncher.

Carteret had heard most of the story in Sig Arno's saloon. The Marshal had found the interior of the homesteader's shack a shambles. The puncher, a gun in hand, lay dead in the wreckage; the homesteader had the puncher's bullet in his shoulder. Backed by Rebel, Sandrich had claimed self-defense, saying that the rider had drawn on him as he ran to his daughter's aid and that liquor had slowed the puncher's speed a split second.

There were no witnesses to prove Dutch Evers' claim that his man was gunned down and that the girl had shot her father and then placed the gun in the dead man's hand. But, even so, cattlemen ran this town, and the homesteaders had little hope in the outcome.

There was pressure at the corners of Rebel's mouth, put there by the dragging moments. There was something about her that held his interest so completely that Brett had a distinct feeling of surprise

when he heard Dutch Evers' grumble come at him.

"Almost ran me down, friend." The Star-Cross owner was a stocky man with a violent twist to his mouth. "Oughtn't look at her like that. One of my boys got murdered in cold blood for takin' a fancy to that face. Wait'll we hang the old man. It'll be safer then."

The man's smug arrogance thinned Carteret's lips. "You sure you're going to hang him, Dutch?" he asked mildly. "Jury seems to be taking its time. Maybe they'll decide to give Sandrich a medal for riding the town of an undesirable citizen."

Someone nearby snickered at that, and Evers' eyes narrowed. Carteret sat his saddle with a deceptive indolence. Ink-black hair showed beneath a flat-crowned hat, and, in the brim's shadow, his eyes held a remote wickedness. He looked like a man who had seen more than his share of trouble and had been toughened by it. This made Evers careful, and there was even relief in his eyes when the bailiff appeared on the courthouse steps.

Evers said irritably: "You talk too damn much, Carteret," and joined the crowd's concerted movement toward the courthouse. Brett felt Rebel Sandrich's interest fully on him, and something about her brought back manners long unused. He touched his heel to the sorrel's flank and lifted his hat to her as he rode past.

He stabled the horse and came out into the last of the sunlight, noting a definite quiet. Men who had not been able to crowd inside made little shifting groups along the street, all their interest centered on the courtroom.

Seconds crawled by, and he knew how it would end. No gambler would place the wildest bet on Sandrich's chances. The thing that held him here was the magnetic presence of the girl who had not moved from the wagon. He had seen her half a dozen times during the trial, and he had caught the hint of deep-running emotions,

of steel and spirit and temper. He felt compelled to stand here waiting to see how she would take the verdict.

The loss of Sandrich, he knew, would mean that the nesters were through here because he was the force that held them intact. Leaderless, they would pack up and drift on. It made little difference to Carteret; he had been on the move for a long time. But in some vague way, he was troubled by what the future held for Rebel Sandrich; this country was hard on women.

Hope dies hard in a man, he thought, watching the nesters. He had seen the hopes of a proud people crushed in a merciless, senseless war and the hopes for a just peace turn to heartbreak. The nesters were the remnants of some of those people. He was too, having ridden out of that other life in complete disillusion, driven by a single ambition, a ruthless quest for the kind of wealth that would buy back what he had lost, but bad luck had dogged his steps from town to town. He had become one of the drifters.

What happened then was clearly unexpected. A man wheeled away from a courthouse window, yelling: "They let him go! They let him off free."

REBEL SANDRICH braced herself against the wagon seat, a smile curving her mouth momentarily, then faltering to a sober expectancy as an ugly murmur raced the length of the street.

In the quick-rising tumult that followed, Carteret's lips drew apart in a bleak smile. His losing streak was holding steady; even a sure thing could go wrong when he guessed the outcome.

The crowd came spilling out of the courtroom then. They had not been prepared for the outcome of the trial; but they shaped up into two groups, and that was the story of this town in a single picture. The big outfits milled together, angry and incredulous; the homesteaders

made an uneasy group by the wagons.

At first, the surprise of it stopped any definite action. Then Conroy, the tough, taciturn Star-Cross ramrod, charged out of Sig Arno's. "Get a rope, somebody," he cried. "We shoulda taken him out and hanged him last night like I told you."

Distaste was a strong feeling in Carteret, but it was his long established habit not to interfere in the troubles of other men. This was not new to him. He had seen it happen in other towns, and the pattern seldom varied. Violence surged beneath the surface here; a single word or one move could set it off.

Blake Kelsey, in the town clothes of a rancher, paused in the doorway with the presiding judge and then came down the steps, a lean weathered man who was a power here.

Dutch Evers stormed over to him, asking hotly: "What happened to that jury? You were ramrodding 'em."

Kelsey said flatly: "The verdict was unanimous."

"Star-Cross won't take that."

"Star-Cross shouldn't hire trouble makers," snapped Kelsey.

Whatever else there was to that interchange, Carteret lost in the rising murmur of the crowd at the appearance of the Marshal and Sandrich. The Marshal was a small, flinty-eyed man who kept his opinions to himself and lived only for his job.

Men shifted so that no one stood between the Star-Cross crew and Sandrich. A tall man in work-worn clothes, he made a lonely shape on the steps. Hushed expectancy drew a man's nerves as taut as a fiddle string. Sandrich stood acquitted, yet Dutch Evers' smile told the nester he would never reach his daughter on the spring wagon alive. He was a man free to ride out; he was a man marked for death. And yet some inner pride held him ramrod-straight before his enemies. He wouldn't run or make a break for free-

dom under the increasing tension of Evers' stare. There was something in this that roused Carteret's reluctant admiration.

"I want all the big outfits to move out of town, the sooner the better," said the Marshal in a steady, implacable way. "I want Sandrich to ride out of here alive. I'll keep him in jail until the town's cleared of hotheads."

Kelsey saw the logic in this. "If a jury can give him a break, I guess the rest of the town can. We'll ride out."

Dutch Evers came away from the Star-Cross crowd by two angry strides, the red crawling into his face. "Star-Cross stays put. I don't want any rebel sod-busters coming into this country and breaking up good range and killing my riders."

"Ride on out with the rest of us, Dutch," said Kelsey. "The law says this man is free."

"Then we'll change the law," cried Evers hotly.

"If you change the law so you can kill one man, you can change it to kill any man you want. Who will it be next week, Dutch, me or one of the others?"

Stubbornly, the Star-Cross owner said: "You'd feel different if it was one of your boys."

"I don't hire gunslingers."

There was a tentative movement by certain men to cover other men. Kelsey was squared away against Evers, their antagonism starkly in the open. Rebel Sandrich held a rifle on Conroy's chest, and she looked as if she was anxious to use it; the foreman's incredulous eyes were glued to her steady hands.

Evers appealed to the crowd. "Why wait this out? Let's hang him now like he deserves."

The Marshal's gun came up in a single smooth motion centering on the men in front of him. Movement stilled under the pressure of the shotgun's slow arc. Three people made a checkmate against

the mob. The Marshal threw the whole weight of his will and reputation against the crowd until it began to break at the edges and melt into formlessness. Then he walked to the jail with Sandrich.

Rebel's rifle covered them until the door had closed; then it wavered. Carteret pulled the cigarette from his mouth, watching her as she stepped down from the wagon and walked slowly into the shadow of a nearby alley. He walked that way and saw her leaning against a store wall, protected from curious and unfriendly stares, all the courage momentarily drained out of her. And he knew that no matter how long he lived, he would remember this girl who was so quiet under tension, who would have killed a man, who would never break until danger was past and who would never cry before hostile eyes.

ODDLY disturbed, he moved on to Sig Arno's place. Before him, at the bar, was an ornate mirror; glittering prisms of light spun away from the glass in bright pinpoints of color. And there was Della's reflection. Her beauty was a challenge to many men; she used it well. Her eyes held his in the mirror, showing her interest as she moved in beside him.

"What did she do to you, Brett?"

"Who?"

"The girl you've ridden a thousand miles to forget? The girl you remember every time you look at me?"

A grim smile twisted his lips. Behind him were the days when he'd had everything a man could ask for, when a woman had put dreams into his head. But she also smashed the dreams to bits, and he didn't like to remember that.

They were nothing alike really; Lucy, the patrician, aristocrat, and Della, the dance hall queen. Yet both were greedy, wanting everything they could get from life and willing to go to any lengths to attain their wants. Della knew her power

over Arno just as Lucy had known her power over Brett, and Della was taking advantage of it and looking often at Dutch Evers with invitation in her eyes. She brought the image of Lucy clearly before him.

Brett shrugged. "Why, she didn't like what was left after the war, the wreckage of the land and the wreckage of the fortunes, so now she's flaunting the wealth of a Yankee carpetbagger in the faces of her friends. It isn't a pretty story."

"It isn't a pretty world," murmured Della and turned from him to Dutch Evers. These two made a handsome couple, Della leaning back against his encircling arm and laughing up at him.

Sig Arno strolled toward them from the office, a fastidious, soft-spoken man, with a killing anger directed at them in his low tone. "There are some things we don't share, Dutch," he said. "Della is one of them. See that you remember it."

All this had come on quietly. They looked like three friends as Evers grinned and dropped his arm, but Carteret saw uneasiness in the rancher and in Della and stored this scene away to remember and speculate on.

He left the saloon, ate a solitary supper and went to his hotel room; it was musty, shabby, far-removed from the comfort he had once known, but he had left the best of himself behind and wanted nothing about him to revive memories. Without lighting the lamp, he pulled a chair to the window and sat smoking in the darkness, noting that the bulk of the crowd had left the street. Silence put a steady pressure against men's nerves. He was thinking about that and building a cigarette when he heard the knock.

He said "Come in" and when the door creaked, he half-turned in the chair and saw Rebel Sandrich standing there in man's shirt, levis, half-boots and a gun belted around her waist.

"You figure to fool anybody in that rig?" he asked mildly.

"It'll do in the dark," she said and, at the threshold she stood before him, her eyes probing his face.

An old saber scar marked his cheek, the relic of a cavalry charge, and the bridge of his nose showed a break from a more recent barroom brawl. These were the outward signs, he reflected, that told the whole history of Brett Carteret, and he wondered how much that odd, intent look read there.

"Your people wouldn't like this, Miss Sandrich."

"There are times when you have to pocket your pride and go begging," she said gently. "I've come here because I think you can help me."

"I see no chance of that."

"I watched you today, Mr. Carteret. You didn't like what you saw out there on the street."

Carteret shrugged. "Miss Sandrich, your world is falling down around you. You're grasping at straws. I'm just a bystander."

"Are you?" Her eyes blazed in the darkness. "Are you just another gambler fighting for his own little pile of chips. Or is it true that you're one of Arno's cheap, tramp gunmen?"

Anger beat at his temples. "Don't jump to conclusions."

"I should know about that," she said. "When I first saw you, I thought I saw some semblance of a gentleman left. I see I was wrong. The little things still mark you, the way you talk, the way you lift your hat to a woman, but inside it's all gone."

"This is none of my affair," he said, surprised that she had the power to stir this much anger in him.

"Not even a spark of manhood left. You just sit here in the dark waiting for them to kill an innocent man. Well, I hope you have a good view from your window."

She had a churning temper, and she used it like spurs against his pride in a way that raked him hard.

"I can see how you came by your name," he said hotly. "For a girl who must have been something of a lady once, you're pretty brash with your talk."

"Who really runs Star-Cross . . . Evers or Conroy?" The question jolted him. Now he saw that she had deliberately baited him into losing control, hoping to surprise him into dropping information.

"I wouldn't know the answer to that."

"Listen," she said desperately. "I was hoping you'd help me. You're tough. Men are wary where you're concerned. Men like Evers. If you'd made one move out there today, it would have changed the whole picture. All right. You say it's none of your affair. You won't interfere, but there's a way you can help me."

"You're hard to convince. I want no part of this."

"There's something going on here," she told him, "something I don't understand. I knew it when Blake Kelsey stood up for Dad. It isn't cattlemen against nesters. It's the start of something big and sinister."

"You've got sharp eyes, but maybe they see more than what actually exists."

"They see that Star-Cross is a hang-out for every gunslinger that comes along the trail. They see that this is a war of bullets against pitchforks. Doesn't that bother you?"

"When a man has learned a lesson fighting for one Lost Cause, he's not likely to fight for another."

Her eyes were wicked. "You really were licked, weren't you? My people fought for that Cause too. Now, they're fighting for a chance to build a new life. Maybe it won't be like what we had before, but we'll be proud of it because we've done it with our own hands. You're too much of a gentleman to dirty your hands building a sodhouse or farming, but don't

they feel dirty sometimes when you use that gun for a man like Arno or Evers?"

He matched her bluntness. "You came here to ask me to use my gun for you. I fail to see the difference."

"The difference between right and wrong, but you wouldn't understand that. Maybe if I offered to buy your service, I'd have better luck."

ANGER was a driving force inside of him so that he pulled her against him and instantly felt her hands come up against his chest. She was strong, but her elbows gave way under pressure. Oddly, it was disturbing to touch her; even more disturbing was the taste of salt in the kiss he took. His momentary triumph turned empty, and he recognized that as her triumph and dropped his arms ready to apologize. She hit him then, across the mouth, and his stinging lips twisted into a savage, mocking grin.

She stepped away from him, all her anger burned out. The gun was in her hand; her eyes were like chips of blue steel.

"I could kill you for that," she murmured, "but I don't have to because you're dead already—inside—where it counts."

She didn't look back as she went through the door. He listened to her footsteps fade, absently shaping a cigarette and looking at himself with irritable directness. Until now, he had looked at the world as a place where the strong survived and the weak did not, and it was every man for himself. Then, this girl had stormed into his life, needing an outlet for the tension that had been building in her for days; the logical outlet was anger, and the anger was directed at him because he had stirred faint hope in her and then destroyed it. She had put confusion into him; she had said things that ate at him like acid.

Carteret tried to shrug the mood off. She was nothing to him, only a home-

steadier's daughter who had provoked some trouble. But he kept remembering her hands, calloused from farm chores and the way she looked on the wagon and in the alley and in this room, a girl with pride and breeding that were out of place in the rawness of this cowtown.

When he left the hotel, deep night had come upon the street. He went directly to a table at Arno's, and, as he eased into a chair, one of the dealers murmured "Back room." He played for half an hour, glanced ruefully at his dwindling pile of chips and then drifted into Arno's office.

"What's on your mind, Sig?"

"I was wondering how you'd like a stake—a sizeable stake to replace the cash you've dropped here. You could take it and move along to a town where there's a fresh start for you."

Carteret drew a careful breath. "What kind of chore do you have in mind?"

"Dutch Evers." Arno smiled. "It's worth a lot of money to me—if it's done right."

"If it's done—how?"

"With a shotgun to look like an ambush."

Carteret expelled his breath with a soft sigh. Rebel had been right, there was something sinister here. It was like a game of chess with Arno making the moves. Evers was his partner. Evers would kill Sandrich tonight and would be ambushed in a way that would appear as retaliation. Then Arno would have Conroy and the Star-Cross crew stir up enough trouble to precipitate a range war, and when it broke, Arno's men would see to it that certain men were killed, men like Kelsey and the Marshal, so that the saloon man would emerge the power here.

Arno had asked him to make the first move so that he could sweep the board clean without ever becoming publicly involved; in return, he was offering Brett a fresh start, another chance to do the thing he had set out to do, so long ago. The

cost would be the knowledge that Rebel Sandrich had seen through to what he was. Surprised that she had gotten so deeply into his thoughts, Brett knew that there was no longer any chance of remaining neutral. Arno was forcing him to take sides.

"I must have come a long way for a saloon man to offer me blood money," he said softly. "No deal, Sig. I like to sleep nights."

Arno disliked refusals. He opened the door of his office, glancing obliquely at the gambler. "Then you'd better do your sleeping in some other town. You're through here. Drift on tonight."

Carteret watched him move away. Half-way across the room, Della waited for Arno, a smile curving her mouth, sure of her power over him, a smile that faded as he brushed by without a word. It took Brett back, a long way back. He had walked past Lucy that way the night she flaunted her marriage before the proud tattered remnants of southern aristocracy, walking toward her and past her and out of her life. A man could ride a thousand miles and find the past waiting to haunt him in some strange room, he thought. Then, Della's presence brought him back.

"If that girl you tried to forget decided she wanted you again, Brett, would you go back to her?"

He knew she wanted an answer that would leave her some hope; yet, he knew, in surprise, that his feeling for Lucy had burned itself out, leaving only ashes.

"Della," he said gently, moving toward the door, "once a thing has changed, it can't ever be the same again."

"Then it's over," she told him, "that and this too. Over for good. What will you do—ride on out?"

"I've ridden out of a lot of places, but my troubles seemed to ride along with me. Maybe a man has to make a stand somewhere."

She touched his arm. "Good luck then. You'll need it."

Taking a stance in the gloom outside, he put a watchful glance along the street and weighed the night noises, knowing the value of intangibles and letting them fit together into a complete picture before he moved. A Star-Cross puncher was stationed outside Arno's to warn the crew inside when the Marshal came out to see if the town was cleared before releasing Sandrich. They would draw the lawman into a trap and then take the nester out of jail and finish the thing they had started on the street earlier. A plan began to shape up in his mind. There were holes in it, but time was short.

CARTERET moved along the rear of the stores that fronted the street until he came to the alley across from the jail; near its mouth he spotted the shadow of a solitary watcher. Brett went that way, the sound of his footsteps bringing the watcher around, a definite shape now against the light from the street.

"Hold up there," said Rebel flatly. The flinty edge to her voice told him she was cocked for trouble and would use the gun in her hand, and the bleak and bitter undertone meant that she knew the hopelessness of this and yet would play out her part in it.

"That's twice tonight you've pulled a gun on me," said Brett. "Don't ever draw on a man when you make such a fancy target."

"What do you want?"

He heard the soft whisper of the gun against leather as she holstered it and moved down the alley until he stood so close that he could make out the faint freckling of the delicate-boned face.

He said slowly "Mind if I deal myself in on your little game?"

The echo of her earlier contempt still lingered in the bitter-bright eyes. "I'm afraid I can't afford your price."

"All right," he said heavily. "All right. I deserved that. I'm sorry for what happened. I came to tell you I'd help you. There's no price."

"The words of a gentleman," she mocked. "You came here straight from Arno's. Did you rehearse your little speech in the back room there? Who thought it up—Arno or Evers?"

He had come to this decision by a long and hard road and at a tremendous cost to his pride, and having made his offer in sincerity, her rebuff was an unexpected shock that put rash anger into him.

"I came out of Arno's place . . . for good," he said, anger slurring his words more than usual. "I've got a hole card. It may work; it may not, but in any event, all hell will break loose. Get off this street."

"When all hell breaks loose, I'll be right here because I don't trust any cards from Arno's place. This is some kind of cheap trick cooked up to kill my father. Well, it won't work, Carteret, so you can go back and tell whoever owns your gun that I'll be right here and that I intend to kill the first man who tries to lay a hand on Dad."

"If you're bent on being the target for the first bullet," he snapped, "it's none of my affair."

Brett wheeled away, retracing his steps and circling Arno's to avoid the probing eyes of the Star-Cross spy. He came at the jail from the rear and held a muffled conversation with the Marshal through the closed door. He waited restlessly, impatience coming on him now that the thing had started, while the Marshal held a hurried conference with the nester inside. Then he heard the sound of the heavy bar being lifted, and the door swung open.

"It's a long shot," said the lawman as they moved down the hall. "You'll need plenty of luck to make it work."

Carteret estimated his chances and knew a gnawing doubt as he thought of

the relentless losing streak dogging him.

"What's the first move?" asked the nester quietly.

"To get your daughter off the street without tipping the plan. She could give the whole show away."

The Marshal stepped to the lamp and killed the light before raising the shade so that Sandrich could stand at the window and call Rebel softly. Carteret could hear their murmured conversation, the girl protesting softly. He knew what she would be saying. The events of this day had roughed her up, leaving her wary and suspicious. Presently, she reluctantly agreed to her father's demands and made a show of moving downstreet toward the hotel, but Brett knew what an effort it cost her; her distrust and hatred for him made it hard for her to withdraw, leaving her father in his hands.

Half an hour later, the unexpected happened for the second time that day. The Star-Cross lookout rushed into Arno's place and yelled: "The Marshal let Sandrich go. He didn't even come out to see if the town was clear."

Evers came out of his chair with an oath. A voice cried: "Star-Cross! Star-Cross! Out front." But even as they crowded through the door, the spring wagon rumbled past, the lanky driver in worn homesteader's garb, laving the lash across the horses' backs. Before a shot could be fired, darkness had swallowed the wagon.

"Conroy," cried Evers. "Pick your men and go after him! The rest of us will deal with the Marshal. Move dammit!"

Riders swung into saddles; horses pounded out of town under the bite of spurs. Evers slanted a furious glance at the jail. "Hell, he's proved once already he isn't coming to us. What are we waiting for?"

They marched the short distance to the jail, spreading out a little and moving steadily forward until the flat command

stopped them. "That's far enough, boys."

Evers peered through the gloom, trying to spot the lawman. "You made a big mistake bucking Star-Cross, Marshal."

"Who is Star-Cross?" asked Carteret from the alley. "Answer that one, Evers."

Brett watched surprise widen Evers' eyes. All of this had come on at Evers' instigation; until this moment, he had been well in command of the situation. This stopped him cold. With faint amusement, Brett watched the rancher take in the rough, shabby homesteader's attire he had borrowed from Sandrich. "Anger forced Evers' lips apart as he realized that Carteret had ridden out on the wagon, masquerading as the nester and dropping off at the edge of the town to double back here. His crew was split, half of them chasing an empty wagon.

"Who is Star-Cross?" He flung the question before Evers could decide what to do. "You or Sig Arno?"

DUTCH clawed at his gun and fired. Then, his whole body jerked to the impact of Brett's bullet so that he sat down hard, rolled in the dust and died there. The Marshal's blasting shotgun shell drove a Star-Cross gunman through a store window. Brett's eyes gauged the men before him; the deadly swiftness of this had shocked them still, and they might have given way then if Conroy had not charged up the street on his mustang. He left the saddle on the dead run and made a compelling figure in their midst, pulling them together.

"Star-Cross is through here," said Carteret flatly. "Take what's left of it and get out, Conroy."

"With Evers you must have been lucky. Don't crowd your luck."

"All right, Conroy, if you're ready for it, you can have it."

The cock of the Marshal's gun made a distinct click, pushing Conroy to a wild

haste. He was shooting as his gun arced upwards. One bullet spewed dust; the second splintered the boardwalk. From off to the left a bullet found its target, ripping into Carteret's thigh; he stumbled like a drunken man, caught onto the tie rail and drove a shot at Conroy. Even as he saw the tremendous surprise fade to blankness on the foreman's face, he threw two quick shots toward the unseen gun that had located him. There was silence now as the gun crew saw their two leaders dead in the street.

Carteret put a steady stare on the nearest man, saying: "What about you? Would you like to try your luck?"

The sudden turn of the tide had put a dismal fear into this man's eyes. Despite the odds, the thing had gone all wrong.

Carteret's voice pushed him. "Make up your mind, damn it."

Under the threat of crossfire between this man and the Marshal's shotgun, the crew stood motionless. Brett knew he had them then. They were hired killers, and the men who had hired them were dead. They were torn between hate and fear, and fear proved the stronger.

"All right, all right," the nearest man mumbled. "Me. I'm convinced. I'm pulling out."

One by one, they went toward their horses, keeping their hands well away from their bodies.

"You might give Arno the word," said Brett harshly. "Tell him he's through in this town, you hear?"

"I hear," said Arno softly.

Even as Carteret knew with cold and terrible certainty that he had made the fatal blunder of underestimating his opponent, a .45 slug smashed high into his body, jerking him around, his leg gave way, and he pitched forward into the dust.

The saloon man was coming at him, gun in hand, and he accepted this for what

it was the finish of the game for Brett.

Arno's hand was lifting, and Carteret braced himself to take the shot. A gun spat flame; a bullet whined past his head. Arno's whole body seemed to be lifted up; both hands clutched at his mid-section as he fell. Rebel Sandrich walked past Brett and stood looking down on Arno.

Bright pinpoints of light danced in his head. Voices said the Marshal was dead; they said Sandrich was safe; they said there would be no range war if both sides would compromise; they seemed miles away . . . all except one, a voice repeating his name, calling him back to consciousness. The shock was wearing off now, and pain and sickness were rioting within him, but there was the strong, steady curve of Rebel's mouth to look at and her steady eyes above his face.

"Brett," she said desperately "Brett listen. I'm sorry . . . the things I said."

"Don't be sorry. You were right."

"No. I was wrong. The first time I saw you I thought there was a spark of something in you, something you had once been and could be again. Only when you did change, I was a fool. I had to see before I'd believe. What I'm trying to say is that I'm sorry for distrusting the word of a gentleman.

"Brett you were willing to die for me. Now I'm asking you to live for me."

There was something magic in this girl, something he responded to as he responded to nothing else. It had changed all his values, driven him to a reckless gamble, and even now, as he lay in the dust, it could put the will to live in him.

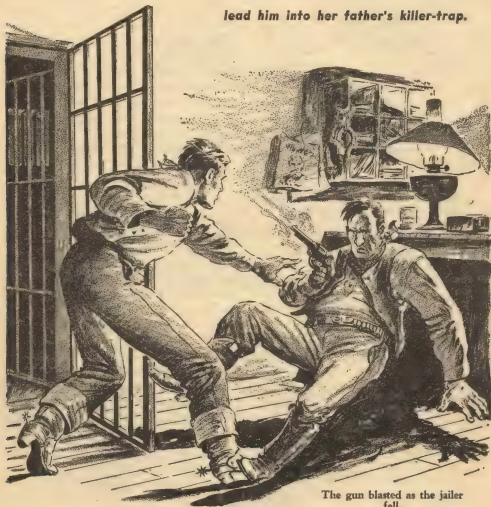
Everything was clear to him now. It was a strange thing, he thought; a man could ride endless miles for endless years pursuing a vague elusive goal and know at the end he had only fooled himself, that he hadn't been seeking anything but only running away from his own inadequacy.

THE END

HEMP STRETCHER

By
PHIL RAY

Beautiful Juana Halsted freed rancher Jud Carson from the hangman's noose—only to lead him into her father's killer-trap.



The gun blasted as the jailer fell.

THE prisoner knelt to look at the food the jailer had left him. A rough pattern of dark stripes lay across the stone floor and he glanced up at the barred window, noticing the feeble ray of light that filtered through the bars. It was growing cold in the damp cell and

he shivered a little. He leaned closer to the tray of food and was about to pick it up. He sniffed, then rose and sat down on the bunk. He rolled a cigarette instead. In Sutton Mills even a condemned man didn't get a decent meal. Jud Carson tried not to think of the hanging that was

due him in the morning of the next day.

The judge had pronounced sentence that afternoon. There hadn't been much of a trial, but it was adequate according to the standards of mountain men who were apt to consider such things as law courts superfluous barriers to quick justice.

Carson settled back on the bunk, watching the pattern creep slowly across the floor.

Sleep did not come easily and after a while he was brought abruptly to his elbows by a commotion in the front office. It was dark outside now and the glitter of stars could be seen through the narrow window. Again he had the shut-in feeling and wished he could be away from all this and back on the little spread he had started up on Coyote Creek. He brought a hand up to his face and scratched the three-day stubble, the itching thing he had accumulated while he waited trial. He heard the clink of glasses in the front office. The jailer's roar of laughter followed.

He lay back again, trying to find comfort on the too-short bunk. Again the laughter reached him. Probably the jailer had invited his girl in for a few drinks.

The noise kept him awake for a time. When the other noises of the town had subsided he could still hear the jailer and the girl. He did not know what time it was when finally they grew quiet. Shortly afterward the deep snores of the jailer began to ring through the stone building. Jud thought he could hear the front door open and close softly.

A moment later someone was whispering to him through the window.

He got up off the bunk. A face was peering in at him. It was a girl. "You are Jud Carson?"

He frowned. "Yes."

The girl handed something through the bars. She whispered, "I have got the jailer drunk and he is sleeping it off.

Here is the key. I have a horse waiting for you."

Jud took the key. He thought he recognized the girl, but he could not remember where he had seen her. He wanted to ask why she was doing this and had started to speak when the girl interrupted.

"Quickly. There is no time for questions."

He shrugged it off and reached through to unlock the cell door. He shoved it open and stalked quietly through the corridor to the door of the office. There was no sound now on the other side. The deputy had either awakened or was sleeping soundlessly. But there was only one possible exit and that was through the front office.

Jud lifted the latch and swung the door wide. Light from the outer office streamed in on him, blinding him momentarily. He blinked, wondering if what he was seeing was only imagination. He knew it was not when the deputy spoke.

"Thought you'd send your girl down here and get me drunk, huh, Carson? Get me off my guard and then ease out, huh? I ain't so stupid, mister. Get back in there."

The red-faced man was standing squarely in front of the door. His eyes were shot with blood and his tongue thick, but he was not so drunk that he could not hold the gun unwavering against Carson's mid-section.

"Get back," he ordered, and began edging forward.

Carson moved back a step. In turning he whipped his foot swiftly across the floor against the deputy's spurred heels. The man lost balance from the impact. His spurs rowelled sharply against the stone floor as his feet shot out from under him. The gun went off as he was going down. Jud felt the muzzle blast. The heat of it scorched the side of his face. Blindly, he groped for the gun, simultaneously swinging out with his closed right fist,

sending a hard blow to the jailer's face. He felt the grasp on the gun relax as the deputy fell back, his head slamming against the stone floor.

Jud bent over the man. He would be all right. He was only stunned.

He rummaged through the sheriff's desk, found his gun belt and strapped it to him. He took the rest of his property from the drawer. Then he blew out the light and stepped cautiously to the door.

ALL was darkness and silence in the street. Jud slipped through the doorway and scurried to the rear of the building. The girl was waiting for him there, the two horses saddled and ready.

Jud looked at the girl, wondering again why he could not place her. She was small, slender. Jud experienced a feeling of awkwardness as he approached her, his own spare frame towering above hers. She wore a cotton cambric shirt and a pair of faded blue trousers that were too large and obviously cast-offs. Her dark eyes gleamed in the night, and her black hair spilled softly from beneath the sombrero. Beauty was there, Jud thought, reluctant to hide even under a man's rough clothing.

She looked at him with anxiety. "I heard a shot," she whispered. "What happened?"

"The jailer woke up," Carson said. "We had a little scuffle." He extended a palm to the girl. "I'm obliged to you for getting me out of there. I don't know why you did it, but I'll try to repay you later. If you could tell me where I—"

The girl brought her hand forward in a silent sweeping gesture. When Jud reached out for it he discovered a small revolver in it. The girl thrust it toward him menacingly. Jud stepped back, not trying to hide his surprise. Brief anger pierced him. But then he recognized the grim determination in the girl's face and it made him want to laugh. He towered

above her. Her own smallness caused him to feel the great strength that was his by comparison. Still, she meant business.

"That's a mighty neat trick," he said. "Never saw a man sneak out a gun like that."

"You're coming with me," she said with finality.

Carson shrugged broad shoulders. "All right with me. Only I'd like to know where we're going."

She placed the gun back into its holster. "I can trust you then?"

Carson grinned. "With a draw like that? Anywhere, ma'am."

The girl mounted. "You will follow me then. To the Halstead place."

So this was Juana, the daughter of Gray Halstead, Carson's neighbor who was seldom seen by him and then only at a distance, and his wife whom Carson had never met. Halstead was a small rancher who should have welcomed the alliance of another like himself. Jud was thinking of the larger faction, Hal Rossick and Burt Carr, the big rancheros who wanted the Mill River country to themselves. Only Carr was dead now. It was for the murder of Burt Carr that Jud had been brought to the jail at Sutton Mills and sentenced to hang. The evidence against him had been as plain as the horse tracks leading straight from the scene of the murder to Carson's home corral.

Yes, Halstead should have sided with Jud Carson, for they were natural allies, both fighting against the land-grabbing techniques of Rossick and Carr. But Halstead was an obscure individual who lived deep in the hills and befriended no one. Carson remembered the vicious hounds that had been his only welcome the few times he had approached the Halstead cabin.

He looked up at the dark-haired girl who was mounted astride the big horse. She looked smaller than ever, he thought. But there was a way that she held her-

self, erect and silently aloof, as though the horse and saddle under her were merely incidental things.

He mounted the roan she held for him and said, "Lead the way."

The girl led him silently through the thick grove of willows behind the jailhouse and down to the river's bank. She chose to ford here rather than to ride the quarter mile downstream to the bridge. Still following her, Jud took the sack of tobacco from his shirt pocket and stowed it in his hat for the trip across. They plunged in, cold water rushing past them almost shoulder high. On the other bank the girl located a steep trail and followed it up the hillside, skirting thick brush and large boulders.

CARSON retrieved the sack and rolled a smoke as they rode through darkness. He cupped his hands for the light, the flare of the match throwing a pale wash over his features. Jud's face was angular like the rest of him. Even under the beard there was a boyish look to Jud Carson; a carefree look, as though he didn't give much of a damn what happened. It was the kind of face which had provided deception for a certain few who had tried to cross him. Carson was a man you could push just so far. A person had to look pretty deep to see the determination that lay deep behind the humor in those quiet gray eyes.

Jud tossed away the match. He looked down upon the few lights that were still burning in Sutton Mills. The town was a slithering stretch of rough-hewn buildings along the river's edge, forced into single file by the steepwalled and wooded slopes on either side. He tried to make out the jailhouse and wondered if the jailer had come to yet.

"They'll be coming for me in the morning, at any rate," he thought. "They'll be coming to hang me. Some folks in Sutton Mills are going to be mighty dis-

appointed." There were those who had counted on seeing Jud Carson hang. Sheriff Olsen, who had brought him in and was convinced of his guilt, was one of them. White-haired Hal Rossick, who merely wanted one more thorn out of his side, was another.

They rode on. The roan felt strong under him and Jud thought that if nothing else could be said for Gray Halstead, he at least raised stock that suited this rugged country. Finally, the girl topped the rise. They rested there for a moment, letting the horses blow. Carson studied the girl. Sensing it, Juana turned to him, smiling for the first time. "It is not far now," she said.

When they started down a chill wind followed them, sounding an eerie note through the pines and lending an ominous feeling to Carson's increasing anxiety. What did Halstead want with him, he wondered, and what kind of man was it who would send the young girl out to do his dirty work for him? He pulled his hat down against the wind, felt it biting through his thin shirt.

It was dawn when they rode into the clearing. The cabin was at the edge of timber, a crude affair fashioned from the native pine, but solidly built like the barn and pole corrals standing next to it. As they rode into the yard Jud noticed none of the litter and debris that marked many a squatter's dwelling. The place was a model of neatness and hard practicality.

Gray Halstead was sitting on the front steps, whittling with a long-bladed knife. As Juana and Jud rode up three giant hounds leaped out from under the porch and bounded toward them, barking wildly. Halstead stood up. At a harsh bellow from him the dogs returned, slinking to their den under the porch.

Juana and Carson dismounted. Halstead was a huge man, bald-headed and hairy-armed. His faded shirt lay tight across his middle. He folded the knife

and shoved it into a pocket. "Tend to them horses," he said to the girl. "An', mind you, curry them good or you'll git a whalin' you ain't likely to forget."

He turned and started for the door. "Come in, Carson," he said. "I been expectin' you."

A long rifle hung over the stone fireplace. Mrs. Halstead, who stood near the stove at one end of the single room, eyed Carson suspiciously as the two men entered. She was a thin, work-worn woman with graying hair that had once been dark. A sharp contrast, Jud thought, to her well-fed husband. She was olive-skinned like her daughter. Beauty might have been hers at one time, but it was lost now under the deep lines of her face.

"Ma's fixin' some grub for us," Halstead stated as he sat down at a rough pine table, motioning for Jud to do likewise.

The smell of fat bacon frying filled the room. Carson sat down, realizing an immediate hunger. He remembered the meager rations they had served at the jail and the prospect of a decent meal pleased him, even if nothing else here did.

The fat man produced the knife again and flipped open its long blade. He began whittling on a pine sliver. "Hear tell you was due for a hangin'," he said.

Carson nodded. "This morning. Somebody killed Burt Carr and run a horse into my corrals. Whoever did it tried to make it look as if he was trying to cover up his trail. But he made damn sure it was plain enough for the sheriff to follow. Like as not he took the trail to town from my place. There's so many tracks along there you couldn't very well single one out from all the others."

Gray Halstead grinned knowingly. "Well now, Carson, that sounds like it might've happened thataway, an' I ain't one to doubt a man's word. But you got to admit it does look bad for you."

Juana came through the door then and

Halstead looked at her. "Anyone see you in town?" he asked.

The girl shook her head.

"What about the jailer?"

"I got him drunk—like you said."

"Did he know who you were?"

"I don't know. He may have seen me in town once or twice. But maybe he didn't remember."

The big man lunged toward her angrily. "I told you to make sure of that."

CARSON knew it wouldn't take long for the jailer to come to. If he wanted to risk his job and admit being tricked by a girl he would tell his story. But he probably knew the girl and where she lived. He could say Halstead himself had freed Carson. Whether the jailer talked or whether he didn't, Carson thought futilely, there was still the threat of a noose around his neck. And Halstead hadn't brought him all the way up here for a friendly chat. There was probably some dirty work he wanted done. Carson thought he knew then who had killed Burt Carr.

He sat down again. Halstead joined him. The girl brought food to the table. The two women ate at a smaller table near the stove.

Halstead ate greedily, noisily, without looking up until he had finished. Then he shoved the plate aside and picked up the knife again. He continued whittling. "What I had in mind was this," he said. "You can bed down here today. Rest up. Come nightfall you'll head for Rossick's place. He's the only one who stands in my way now. I'll send the girl with you. She'll make sure you do the job."

Carson knew what he meant. The man expected him to do cold-blooded murder. One more killing and it would only be a matter of time until the Mill River country would belong to Gray Halstead. The two big ranchers would be out of the

way. Carson himself would be a wanted man. He would have to leave the country. There was little else to prevent the fat man from becoming the lord and master that he so wanted to be.

Carson felt a stab of sudden anger. He rose to his feet, shoving back the chair so that it slid across the rough floor. He made an impulsive grab for his gun. The butt of it brushed his fingertips.

Halstead flipped the long-bladed knife so that he held its point between two chubby fingers. "Don't try it, Carson! I could carve your gizzard out before you'd have a chance to draw that smoke-pole. Sit down. Take it easy."

The fat man leaned across the table, holding the knife, blade forward now, its point barely touching Carson's ribs. He slid the gun easily out of Jud's holster and jammed it through his own belt. "Don't try anything like that again, Carson. You're in a tight. You'd best do like I tell you."

Jud sat down again. He felt like a fool. Halstead had been so sure of himself he hadn't even bothered to take Carson's gun until he'd been threatened with it. Even then he'd been calm enough about it, as if he were taking a harmless toy from a kid. Carson's blood began to boil; and there was nothing he could do about it.

Halstead went on talking calmly. "Maybe you're wondering what you'll get out of all this. I'll tell you: the fastest horse in the country and a chance to get out of it." He squinted toward the opposite wall, holding the knife ready for a throw. He flipped it easily. The knife sunk in with a solid thud, bare fractions from the big housefly that had rested there. "You ain't in no position," he went on, "to ask for more."

"But suppose," Jud questioned, "I don't do it like you think I will?"

The big man shouted, "Juana, fetch me my blade!" He looked again at Car-

son and said, quietly, "You will. The girl and the dogs will go with you. Juana knows what will happen to her if anything goes wrong. And," he nodded toward the door, "them hounds can outrun any horse in the country, an' they'd just as soon track man scent as anything else. You wouldn't want to have 'em get hold of you, Carson, I can tell you that."

The girl brought the knife back and laid it on the table in front of the fat man. Whatever it was he held over her, Jud thought, it was pretty powerful medicine. It sickened him the way Juana Halstead cringed before this ugly, obese creature of greed and cunning.

Halstead rose to his feet. He took the rifle down from over the fireplace. "Let's go, Juana," he said. "There's work to be done. You can sack out on that cot in the corner, Carson. If you git hungry Ma'll fix you some grub. But don't try to leave. Them dogs'll have you tore apart afore you can git out the door."

The two of them left and Carson went to the sink where Mrs. Halstead was bent over the dirty plates. He grabbed a towel. "I may as well give you a hand," he said.

The woman looked up at him unsmiling, her withered face an impassive mask. She looked older than Halstead, but Carson guessed she was actually years younger. Finally, she shrugged, said, "Suit yourself," and bent over her work again.

She said nothing more until they had finished. Then she looked at him again and said, "You don't look like a killing man."

"I've come pretty close to being one at times," Carson said.

CARSON suddenly wondered if this strange woman with her silent ways might still have a spark of decency left in her, even after having lived so long with a man preoccupied with greed. Per-

haps the woman hungered for the goodness of things she had so long been denied. He wondered if the thing he was seeing in her dark, sunken eyes and the note he was hearing in her voice was not the thing he wanted.

Carson spoke again. "No," he said, "I couldn't kill a man in cold blood."

Mrs. Halstead let her shoulders droop, the tension seeming to go out of her. She dropped to a chair. "You're not the sort of man who could," she said. "You're not like him—my husband. Though he was a good man once. Sometimes I wonder what sort of thing it is gets into a man when he'll stop at nothing to get what he wants."

Carson shrugged. "There are more than one like him."

Mrs. Halstead rose suddenly. "You must go," she said. "It's not in you to do what he demands. My husband can be what he wishes. But he can't make a murderer out of someone else. And if you don't do what he says he'll kill you."

"He'll kill you, too," Jud said, "if he finds you've let me go." And seeing the fear in her face, Carson knew he spoke the truth.

"No," she said, "I'll tell him you took the gun and forced your way out. I have a gun here."

She got up, moving with determination, took a small revolver from a drawer and handed it to him. "I'll saddle a horse," she said.

The small woman slipped quietly out the door, speaking harshly to the dogs. They stood back, deep growls buried in their throats. Jud followed her to the door, opened it a crack after she had gone. The dogs rushed at him, snarling angrily, baring wicked, yellow fangs. He closed the door again quickly. Halstead hadn't been bluffing. He kept the dogs hungry purposely.

When Mrs. Halstead came back she held the door open, speaking again to the

dogs. "Hurry," she said in a low whisper.

Carson mounted the black she had saddled for him. He looked down at the tiny, shrunken woman standing beside him. "I'll be back, Mrs. Halstead," he said. "I'll be back because of you—and because of the girl. Juana is your girl, your flesh and blood. But not his. I can see that now."

The woman looked up at him steadily. "There's more truth in what you say than you know. We never told Juana. She believes Gray is her father. The girl has an exaggerated sense of loyalty; and also a great fear of him. Gray takes advantage of that. But Juana's real name is Lopez. My first husband was killed by Indians many years ago when Juana was only a baby. He was a poor man, but we were about to become rich. Until the Apaches found out about the gold. It was they who killed him. They would have killed us all. But Gray saved us—Juana and me. I married him later and we never told Juana he was not her real father. Perhaps that was a mistake; but it's too late now. I can't tell you more. You must ride away and not come back."

Carson shook his head. "I can't do that. I've a stake here myself. There are others, too. I don't intend to run away for keeps."

"You must," the woman told him. "I've done what I can for you. Do it for me if not for yourself. I've risked my life to let you go."

Carson did not move. "I think your husband killed Burt Carr," he said, looking directly at her.

She looked down. "Please. Don't ask me more. After all, Gray is my husband."

She looked off across the clearing. A terror seemed to seize her. Carson followed her glance and saw Halstead ride into the clearing, long rifle cradled in his arm. But he chose not to use the gun. Instead, he shouted a command to the dogs.

"Get away," Carson could hear the woman saying. "Quickly!"

But it was too late. Vicious snarls scratched the air as the three hounds leaped off the porch. Jud clawed for the gun, brought it up and then down against the nose of the first yellow beast who jumped for him. He dug spurs into the black. The frightened mount wheeled, let fly with both hind feet. Jud could feel the impact as hard hooves met solidly with the massive ribs of another of the giant hounds.

Carson's lean body clung easily to the frightened, plunging mount. The black reared, forefeet striking viciously as the other dog tore in for a neck hold. Carson aimed hurriedly. Fired. The slug nosed harmlessly into the dirt. The dog yelped as one of the black's shod hooves tore into his flank. The beast wheeled around, rushed in again. His great jaws stretched open as he leaped, aiming for Carson's gun hand. Jud fired again and missed. The jaws closed in a vice grip around his lower arm. Vicious teeth sunk in, stopped by bone. Jud felt himself being pulled down by the dog's heavy frame. The other two beasts circled in for the kill, wary now of the black's striking hooves. Carson dropped the reins, brought the gun to his left hand. Holding the barrel against the dog's head, he pulled the trigger. The hold on his arm relaxed and Jud shook the animal loose.

He was aware of a rifle shot from the edge of the clearing, and only unconsciously aware that it had lodged in the side of the cabin. He heard the woman's scream. He saw Halstead gallop back across the clearing and into the timber again. Shoving spurs to the black, Jud leaned forward to gather up the reins. The horse lengthened itself in a fast gallop across the clearing.

As they neared the timber he glanced back. A group of horsemen followed swiftly. He recognized the sheriff in the

lead. They had guessed or had known who the dark-haired girl in town last night was.

HALF the group of riders had separated from the others and were following the trail Halstead had taken. The two dogs, still by the cabin, circled the dead one uneasily.

Mrs. Halstead was still on the porch, looking out across the clearing with a strange sort of madness in her deep-set eyes.

Carson's big black tore into the woods like a longhorn steer crashing a thicket. The trees were thick here and Carson felt the branches whip across his shoulders and face. The horse lunged him against a stout pine trunk and Carson jerked savagely on the reins. Still, he did not try to slow the mount. The forest echoed the thunder of the sheriff and his men. They were close behind, but with the fresh horse Carson knew he could outrun them. He glanced down at his mangled right arm. It pained him terribly now. The shirt sleeve was soaked, and Carson knew that he was leaving a trail of blood—a trail invisible to men, but unveiled to the noses of hungry hounds.

Jud Carson rode for his life that day. Several times, lead from the sheriff's high-powered rifle overtook him, or plowed deep furrows in the soft ground at his mount's flying heels.

In the eyes of the law he was an escaped criminal now, and there would be none of the formality of a hanging. A slug would do as well—a hard, impersonal hunk of lead. They'd hunt him down until they found him. There would be no mercy. No gallows, no hangman, no crowd of curious people looking up at him and feeling a little sad because a man had to die.

He knew he could not trust Mrs. Halstead to tell the truth about Carr. She would not betray her husband. If they

brought him back to Sutton Mills now they would bring him back dead. So Carson pushed the stout horse, pushed him with the savage desperation of a hunted man.

He rode high into the hills. When the needled dampness of the forest's soft floor had given way to bare, rocky ground sparsely covered with catclaw and mesquite, the horse could go no further. The spurs against his raw flanks were no longer felt. Carson dismounted, led the animal into a thicket for hiding and pulled the saddle from its raw back.

He glanced up at the brassy sky and only then did he realize how long he had ridden. His right arm was numb now. He began to feel the loss of blood. When he sat down he realized he was shaking.

How long he slept he did not know. But he slept with the weary somnolence of exhaustion. He knew he was, at least for the time being, safe within the thicket. The posse had been left far behind. Perhaps they had even turned back. Their mounts had been tired to begin with. There was no trail in the rocky ground for them to follow. He slept.

When he awoke it was full dark. It had turned cold and at first he thought it was the cold alone that had awakened him. Laboriously he unraveled his mind from the tangled threads of sleep. He brought himself upright with his one good arm. And then it came to him again, the thing which had troubled him in his sleep. He realized with a painful awareness that it was coming closer. The sound, like the blare of a trumpet, reached him. The hounds shattered the darkness with their full, throaty howls.

He came to his heels, crouching low in the deep thicket. The dark outline of the horse was next to him. He thought of mounting and riding off, but knew it was no use. The horse still stood with lowered head. He could not have run fifty yards.

Far off he could make out the bellowing voice of Gray Halstead. The hounds answered with their long, persistent howls. He reached for the gun at his side. Hurriedly he filled its six chambers, holding it as he did so between his knees. He hefted the weapon awkwardly in his left hand, thumbed back the hammer and waited. . . .

The black horse began to stir. As the running hounds drew in closer it lifted its head nervously, made a soft blowing noise through its nose. Jud spoke to the animal. "You remember 'em, don't you, fella. Let's see if they still have respect for those hooves of yours."

He untied the black and headed it toward the approaching dogs. He gave it a loud slap on the rump and the horse leaped out of the thicket. The two dogs, rushing in, slowed their pace at the sight of the black horse. They circled it warily, deep growls coming from down in their throats. The horse stood, head down, ears moving back and forth nervously, watching warily.

As one of the beasts came around in full view Carson fired. The bullet sailed on harmlessly past, striking a boulder somewhere behind the dog. The animal turned, faced Jud. Carson fired again. The dog yelped, sprang into the air. It crashed through the dense undergrowth where Carson hid. He could see its great jaws as it came for him. He fired again and this time the dog swallowed the slug. Its growl was choked off abruptly.

HOOFBEATS made a rolling echo up the steep, rocky slope. Carson was aware that there were two of them. Again, Halstead's thundering voice. He was calling the dog back now. The one remaining dog. The hound ignored the command. Slinking quietly past the horse, it skirted the edge of the thicket. Hardly able to see the animal, Carson sent a shot crashing through the brush. There was no sound

and he knew he had missed completely.

The dog, wiser than the other, turned tail and retreated a few yards. He circled back slowly. Carson crawled closer to the edge of the thicket. He rested the gun on one of the heavy branches. He triggered again. Orange flame stabbed out into darkness. The dog let out a cry and fell back. Then there were other shots and Jud knew that Halstead's long rifle was sending its lead missiles into the thicket after him. One of them touched his leg as he made an attempt to crawl back. He felt the stinging pain, as if someone had creased his skin with a hot iron.

He took the remaining shells from his belt and forced them into the heated chamber. He crawled back after exchanging volleys with the fat man.

Halstead's hoarse bellow reached him. "Better come out, Carson, or you'll damn soon wish you had."

Carson crawled back farther. He felt weak again. Noisily he tore through the brush, finally emerging on the opposite side. He crawled along its edge, planning to take Halstead from the rear. He could not see the man now. He knew he would have to work swiftly, for his strength was slowly ebbing out.

The fat man was waiting for him at the edge of the thicket.

As Carson reared back, brought his gun up and thumbed back the hammer, Halstead kicked a heavily booted foot against Jud's knuckles. The gun flew out of his hand.

"Trying to crawfish out on me, huh, Carson?"

Carson rubbed the back of his hand against his leg. He came to his feet with effort.

"That's right," Halstead growled, "stand up. Don't take it laying down." He flipped open the long-bladed knife.

"Guess you thought that posse would git me. I got rid of them easy. Nobody knows these hills like I do. And then I

came back for my dogs so's I could git you." He stepped forward with the knife in his hand.

"You should've brought your daughter with you," Carson said. "so she could do some more of your dirty work for you."

Gray Halstead laughed. "Yes, my daughter. My darlin', lovin' daughter. I reckon the old lady told you about that, too."

And as the fat man spoke Carson saw behind him the small figure of a dark-haired girl in man's clothing. The second rider.

He knew that Halstead was unaware of Juana's presence; that the girl must have followed him secretly for some reason, Halstead thinking she had been lost in the mad race from the sheriff's posse.

"Yes," Carson said, choosing his words carefully, "she told me about that, and about the Indians who wanted her gold mine. I wonder if an Indian would know what to do with a gold mine if he had one."

The fat man laughed again, a drunken bellow. "You got imagination, Carson. Too much for your own good. Of course them Injuns didn't know about the gold. An' wouldn't give a damn if they did. But a 'Pache will do most anything for a little firewater. I would've stayed an' got rich if it hadn't been for that. The damn fools kept coming back for more. Figured I owed it to 'em just because they'd killed a man for me. The government didn't cotton to it, though. Didn't seem to appreciate me getting them Injuns liquored up all the time."

Carson smiled. "So you had to make a run for it. And leave all that gold behind."

"Yes. An' the old lady never knew the difference. Though I'd really saved her an' the kid. An' Juana really thinks I'm her old man. Funny ain't it, Carson?"

Carson edged forward slightly. Halstead shoved the knife toward him menacingly. "No you don't, Carson. You

know the whole story now and it wouldn't do for you to live to repeat it. Not that it makes any difference now, for that posse is hunting me an' I'll have to light out anyway. But you crossed me, Carson. You an' your sweet talk with the old lady. You ain't going to live to do any more talkin'."

He rushed in with the long blade thrust out for the kill. Carson grabbed for it with his good hand. At the same time he slammed his knee upward and felt it sink into the man's soft stomach. He heard him grunt and felt hot breath explode in his face.

For a fat man Halstead was fast. And even more powerful than Jud had imagined. Halstead wrenched his hand from Carson's grasp and brought the long knife plunging down again. Jud felt sharp pain as the blade entered his body. Frantically, he reached for another hold and managed to stop the knife before Halstead had sunk it deeply.

THE point had pierced Carson's chest, just below the collar bone. He felt the warm blood running down his shirt front. Desperately he clung to Halstead's wrist. He heard the man straining to plunge the knife. He saw the greasy sweat break out over his fleshy face.

Then the footsteps. Tiny, rushing footsteps that Carson was only dimly aware of as he struggled with the fat man. But he knew it was Juana. And then another knife blade was fluttering like a silent bird over the big man's head. A rapid up and down plunge of the blade. A harsh scream

pounding into his shattered consciousness. A soft moan, and then a gasp.

Carson never knew when the man let go.

When they both fell he still clung to the fat wrist with a death-like grip.

It was Juana who bent over him when he awoke again in the Halstead cabin. He looked around. White-haired Hal Rossick stood in front of the stone fireplace. He seemed strangely far away.

Juana put a small hand to the bandage that was pulled tight across his chest. "It isn't a bad wound," she said. "It will heal quickly."

Jud tried to smile. It pained him. Standing behind Juana was her mother, smiling down at him sadly. He knew then that she knew the whole sordid story of Halstead's dark past and how he had deceived her.

Mrs. Halstead put her small hands on Juana's shoulders who knelt beside him. "He's dead now," she told him. "And Juana and I will try to forget—to make the past dead too. Perhaps now things will be different."

The gray-haired cowman came over to them. "I guess you're going to be all right now, Carson. We were all wrong about a lot of things. Mrs. Halstead and Juana weren't the only ones. I was wrong too. But Mrs. Halstead is right. Things will be different now."

Yes, Carson thought, turning again to Juana. Things would be different from now on. And he knew of one big change in particular that he was going to make mighty soon.

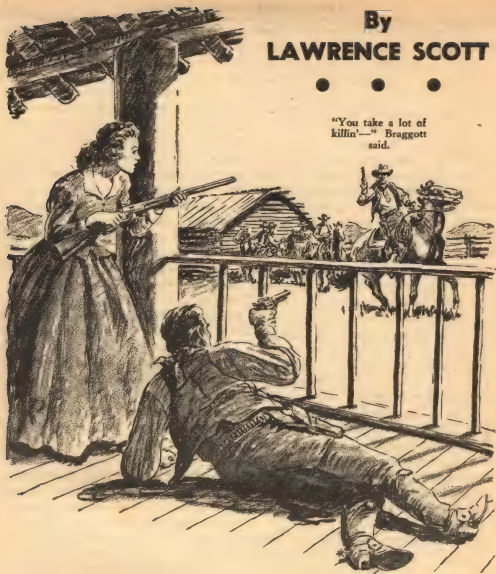
SHOOT—AT YOUR OWN RISK!

Down in southern Texas it was always risky business to shoot a javelina, a small wild boar, unless there was a tree or something else real handy that could be climbed in a hurry. For if the javelina was wounded and not killed, it would gather its band together, go after its two-legged enemy and kill him.

—J. W. Q.

By
LAWRENCE SCOTT

"You take a lot of
killin'!" Braggott
said.



When cowpuncher Lon Madison
returned to the Circle R, he
found he'd been gunhawk-
branded—by the man who took
his job.

BIG SAM BENLAW set himself so
that his body blocked the narrow
footwalk, and he hooked his
thumbs over his wide belt with calloused
fingers splaying downward. He said,
"You'll give me an answer, Madison.
Now."

SATAN'S BROTHER

Lon Madison looked at the man with quickly sharpened curiosity, measuring the flat sureness that was in the voice, the almost arrogant tilt of the big jaw. Three years ago Benlaw had come to the High Mesa country with a wife, two underdressed kids, and a wagon with a wash-tub banging against its side. And not much else. Lon had been foreman of the Circle R, then; and Benlaw and the other homesteaders had looked toward the R with dread and fear.

Now he was demanding things. There was wry humor in this, but no ripple of it came to Madison's lean face. He was reflecting that if you give a man a toe-hold and make him fight for it, he'll measure up or die.

Lon said, "You've no reason to ask, Benlaw. I quit the R three years ago—I've no more part in your quarrel, one way or the other."

"You don't stand neutral here," Benlaw said stubbornly. "Not with a batch of gunmen gathered at the R, and our people ready to fight for their homes! We'll take it you're back with the Ryans."

"Take it any way you damn please." Lon was nettled now, partly by Benlaw's attitude and partly by the weight of the old memories that came flooding back, bringing with them the familiar feeling of guilt.

He stepped roughly past Benlaw and continued down the street.

This thing had been a long time coming to a head, and the joke of it was on Lon Madison because he had chosen to return to High Mesa just when the lid seemed ready to blow.

The thought that he had waited too long perched in the back of his mind and mocked him. He shrugged it aside—he hadn't come back to stop any war. He hadn't changed. He could do no different now than he had done before, when old Ben Ryan pounded on a table up there at the R and ordered Madison to take

the crew and go burn out the homesteaders who had taken up claims blanketing the entire course of Spanish Creek.

Lon had said no, then. He'd grown up in the middle of a range war, and he knew that it held no profit for either side. His crew was made up of working cowhands, not gunfighters. Old Ben could snort fire if he wanted to, but the day for that sort of thing was past. The R would have to find new sources of water, new range.

Lon had pulled out—but the memory of the hurt in Judy Ryan's eyes had haunted him for three years, pulling him back, back. . . .

And now he came suddenly to a halt as he saw her.

She had come out of the store. A tall girl, slim, yet with the full bloom of womanhood upon her, auburn hair done up tightly to her poised head. Her arms filled with bundles, she moved down the steps and across the walk to the buggy at the hitchrail.

Her name formed itself silently on Lon's lips. Then he was going swiftly toward her, his stride long and eager.

She looked up as he neared the buggy; and some of the bundles fell into the dust. "Lon. . . ."

Her nearness, the touch of her hands upon his, set his throat to aching.

"Lon, where have you been?"

"Wyomin', Oregon—every place, I guess. Judy, you look sweeter even than I remembered."

The unfettered happiness that had come into her eyes drove back, for a moment, the shadows of worry that lurked there. But before she could speak, a man's hard bootheels thudded on the porch, and the hombre who came out of the store placed more bundles in the buggy and then stopped easily to pick up those Judy had dropped. He swung to face Lon then, expectantly.

Judy introduced them. "Clane Baggett—our foreman, Lon."

"Madison, eh?" Baggott thrust out a hand and measured Lon coolly with a pair of deep-set eyes that had mocking devils in them. The man was of about Lon's height, slightly over six feet, but he had a rangy look that made him seem taller. The hollowness of his cheeks pointed up the mobile width of his mouth. He wore his Stetson at a jaunty angle, atop a mane of hair that swept down over the back of his collar. "You should have stuck around, mister. You might still have your job, an' the pleasure of helpin' Miss Judy do her gun-point shoppin'. That storekeeper was bound an' determined he'd sell nothin' to the R—till I put a .45 to his fat middle!"

Judy stirred and said, "Lon, you'll come out to the ranch?"

"I'm likely to hang my hat there for supper," he told her, a reckless something stirring within him now.

"That'll be fine," Baggott broke in, with a meaning glance toward Big Sam Benlaw who was watching all this from a position down the street. "Just so it don't get you in any trouble."

Lon replied to the foreman's cold hard grin in kind and let the implication slide. Baggott helped Judy up and sprang into the buggy to kick off the brake and take up the lines. He wheeled the buggy around with a flourish and put the team to a run; then he twisted his rangy body in the seat, grinning as he threw two quick shots that made Benlaw dodge back for cover.

Baggott's exuberant laugh mingled with the echoes of the shots—then the buggy swung to clatter across the bridge over the creek, and was gone.

Lon faced around toward Benlaw. The homesteader had fired no shot—he'd been mindful of the risk of hitting Judy Ryan, probably—but his face was dark with fury. He ignored Lon and stomped across the street to his mount.

Lon turned and went into the store, where he found the little proprietor wiping sweat from his neck.

"That crazy devil hit anybody out there, stranger?" the storeman asked.

Lon shook his head. "I need a sack of makin's, Adams—or don't you sell to anybody that ever worked for the R?"

Adams fumbled for the tobacco, recognition breaking through the fear that lingered on his face. "Lon Madison! Never thought I'd see you back here, man. I—I got nothin' against the Ryans, mind you. It's just that the little outfits are organized now, an' Sam Benlaw served me notice that it was their business or Ryan's. There's a lot of them an' they've prospered, an' a man's got to—"

"Sure," Lon said, putting down the money.

"Lon, if you'd stayed things might be different. You always did have a level head on you. But that Baggott devil—he just now come in here an' pulled a gun on me!"

Lon sympathized with the little man, then went out and down the street to his horse.

He found Judy Ryan lovely as a dream that night, there at the adobe ranchhouse of the R. She greeted him warmly; and for a moment in the cool silence there was magic between them again, drawing them toward each other, setting his pulse to racing and bringing color to her cheeks. "I—I'll go get Dad," she said.

In a moment she was back, her chin held a little higher and her hand on old Ben Ryan's elbow as she steered the gray-ing owner of the R into the living room. And as Ryan groped for his hand Lon Madison knew the thing that he had not dreamed before.

Ryan was blind. He'd been slowly losing his sight all through those years when he raged and stomped and demanded that Lon build the herd bigger and bigger, that he increase the graze, and finally that

he smoke out the homesteaders who were taking up the watercourse. Always, there toward the last, Ben had found one pretext or another to keep from going outside without Judy—and now Lon knew why.

Judy's wordless look of warning kept him from speaking about it. He tried to greet old Ben naturally, and he answered Ryan's questions about the northern ranges in detail.

The crew came trooping in for supper—a hard-bitten and wary bunch with none of the men who had helped build the R among them. Clane Baggott tossed his hat to the horns of a mounted deer head, gave Judy a darkly flashing smile, and took a place at Ryan's right.

The talk ran swift and uneasy. The men eyed Lon without seeming to do so, and Baggott bragged that they'd cut another homesteader's fence today and shoved some stock through the gap and onto the man's crops.

"Stir 'em up a little, eh boys?" Baggott boomed. There was a round of hard-eyed approval; but Baggott was looking straight at Lon, his smile a thin-drawn challenge.

Lon let it go by. The affairs of the R were no longer any concern of his—he had put all that behind him. Yet he could not put aside the sharp awareness of the tension that was building between himself and Clane Baggott. It was as if they were natural enemies, each watching the other, each waiting for the first move. Sooner or later, if Lon stayed here, that tension must shatter into violence. . . .

When the meal was finished and the crew gone, Baggott caught Judy's arm playfully and led her out onto the porch. Ben Ryan's gray head reared.

"Well, Lon, what do you think of him?"

"You hired him," Lon said. "He must be what you wanted."

"Damn you, give me a straight answer! You never was mealy-mouthed before, talkin' about this thing."

"It's none of my business now."

Ryan came to his feet. "I'll not fight with you again, Lon. We'll go in the livin' room an' have a smoke." He made a good try of it, heading in the direction where he knew the living room lay; but he bumped into a chair and would have fallen if Lon hadn't caught his arm. "All right," he said wearily as Lon steered him into the room and seated him. "Now you know it—my eyes have been failin' me, Lon. It's hell, but I don't let it get me. I can't, not with Judy an' her future to think of. I'm askin' you again: what do you think of Baggott?"

"I think he'll ruin you," Lon said.

OLD BEN'S fist hit the arm of his chair. "I'm ruined if I don't bust loose! Know how many head of beef we shipped last fall? Forty-three. Scrawny stuff that got down-graded till I might as well have given 'em away. That's what Benlaw an' his bunch have done to me, crowding me back onto no-good range. Clane Baggott is goin' to bust 'em so flat they'll crawl out of here like lizards—leavin' aside the argument you always give me, Lon, don't you think he's the man for the job?"

Lon felt a twinge of pity. The old man was pleading for support—he wasn't sure of Clane Baggott. And no man could be sure of him, ever.

"Even if he does chase them out," Lon said, "it will never end there. They've got legal rights to their homesteads. The law will step on you, Ben."

"We're one jump ahead of you there!" old Ben retorted. "The first move will be theirs—they're goin' to hit us first, puttin' themselves outside the law. They been linin' up for it, ever since we showed signs of standin' up for our rights. Baggott says. . . ."

The old man rattled on; but Lon Madison hardly heard the words. He was watching the feverish cast of Ryan's face,

"and he was thinking that Ryan, shut up within the walls of his blindness, had lost touch with things. The intensity of his brooding had warped his judgment.

Judy Ryan came into the living room then, with Baggott towering behind her. "Well, Dad," she said, an odd breathlessness in her voice, "have you got him talked into staying?"

Old Ben's head lifted in surprise. "Why . . . I don't reckon Lon approves of the way we're headed. An' anyway, maybe he's got plans of his own."

"Change them." She was facing Lon now, facing him squarely with her chin lifted a little and color glowing in her cheeks. "The R is your home, Lon. And now it needs you. I—we all want you to stay."

The proudly poised loveliness of her, and the frank warmth that was in her eyes, made Lon speechless for a moment. Then he saw the jolted scowl Baggott was giving her and he said regretfully, "Don't know what use I'd be around here, Judy. My ideas haven't changed any."

"You always believed we should look for range up in the mountains," she said.

Lon nodded. "Good graze up there. The deer are fat as butter."

"An' you'd fight snowdrifts," Baggott snorted. "Half the stock would winter-kill!"

"Not in summer," Lon said. "You'd winter down here. Have to irrigate or lease some land to raise hay. With controlled feeding you'd build beef faster—"

Old Ben Ryan snorted now. "I was here first! I'll lease none of my own range from them Johnny-Come-Latelys!"

"You'll change with the times," Lon said grimly. "Or you'll go under. The quick way to go under is turn loose a bunch of gunhawk hombres—"

Baggott hit him then. The blow came without warning of any kind; it threw all the whiplash energy in Baggott's rangy frame against the side of Lon's jaw, and

the impact of it sent him staggering back against a table.

He shook his head to clear his vision, and he lunged toward the foreman.

But Judy was between them now, her voice rising sharply above Ben Ryan's belated protest.

"Stop it!" she cried. "Clane Baggott, you can leave this house right now!"

Baggott nodded, but his breathing was hard and triumphant, his deep-set eyes aglow with pure joy of battle. There was anger in him too—more of it than would be triggered by the mere fact that he'd had his brand called. The answer to that lay in the smouldering, darkly possessive way the man looked at Judy. . . .

"All right," he breathed. But he glanced down at his holstered gun, then wheeled and determinably stalked out of the house.

After the brief clash had been explained to Ben Ryan the oldster said querulously, "Shouldn't have sent him out like that, Judy."

She ignored that. She was facing Lon, her eyes shadowed with anxiety. "You'll stay, Lon?"

He looked at her and knew that he could not leave again, ever.

But old Ben Ryan hit the arm of his chair and demanded, "Daughter, have you gone crazy? We get a war goin' in our own bunkhouse an' Benlaw's got us right where he wants us!"

"Lon can sleep in the tack shed with Stub Ensley," Judy said. "But he stays . . . if he will. Dad, I've never asked you for anything before. . . ."

Lon left her trying to placate her father and went out to get his saddlebags at the corral.

He saw the dark, shadowy figure of one of Baggott's men lurking nearby, and knew that he was watched. But he knew also that he aimed to stay—and if an old-timer like Stub Ensley still was around, Lon aimed to talk to him.

STUB had fixed up the one end of the tack shed as a private bunkhouse. He was eating a lonely meal when Lon entered, and he looked up and pulled at his moustache and swore.

"Lon! Damn your young hide, where you been?"

"A lot of other places, Stub. Where's the rest of the boys?"

"Gone. They couldn't abide Baggott an' his ways. Me, I stick around out of pure orneriness. But I tol' Ben he didn't have the kind of money that would pay me to eat with them hombres!" The old-timer peered shrewdly at Lon. "Judy kept watchin' the trail for you, but you never showed up. Baggott did, an' he's the kind to make any young gal take notice. Lately, though, I think she's been wonderin' about the hombre. Lon, you goin' to stop that mad-dog hellion before it's too late? I had a run-in or two with 'im—if you need any help—"

"Meanin' what, Stub?"

"He'll raise hell an' put a tall block under it, givin' not a damn who it falls on! War's in the man's blood. You willin' to stand by an' see Judy an' ol' Ben get hurt?"

Lon gave the old cowpoke a wry grin. "You don't need to hit me with a gun-barrel, Stub. I think my horse is being watched—have you got an idea where I could go to pick up a bareback mount quiet-like?"

"I'm nighthawkin' a gather we're holdin' on the flats. Got some of my horses nearby, up in Verde Draw. Lon, what you aim to do?"

"I'll have a talk with Benlaw, first of all."

"Good idea! Pull Baggott's teeth for 'im by keepin' Benlaw from makin' any fool move against us. That's what Baggott's been tryin' to crowd 'im to—then Baggott cuts loose. I like homesteaders no better'n any cowman, but I got to admit these have been patient. Lon, I feel

a lot better with you back on the R. I'll give you odds that Judy does too—my guess is she's come to be purely afraid of that Baggott hombre."

Lon got a wary reception at Benlaw's place, where a meeting of the homesteaders was in progress. But he did get a hearing. These men were sure of their strength now—but when he told them that Clane Baggott was trying to provoke them into an attack, they agreed to wait.

"What we need to know," Benlaw prodded, "is where you fit into this."

Lon grinned. "Maybe I'm just butting in," he told them frankly. "But I do want to see peace on this range."

"You'll never get it till you run Baggott out!" one of the homesteaders told him savagely.

Lon's thinking swung back to that, as he jogged his bareback mount across the range of the R. Baggott was unpredictable, and therefore dangerous. He had his crew to back him, and he had old Ben Ryan approving of him—running the man out, as the homesteader had suggested, might take some doing.

Grim lines were forming up along Madison's jaw. The quiet of midnight lay upon the range now—but the weight of his thinking made it seem an ominous quiet.

Then he thought of Judy, the poised womanliness that had come to her and the frank warmth that had been in her eyes for him.

He'd not leave the R, this time. With the knowledge of that in his mind he felt no urge to do more talking this night, and so he swung past the flat where Stub Ensley was night-herding, and rode directly to the ranch.

A quarter-mile away from the ranch buildings Lon dismounted. Slipping the bridle from his borrowed mount he slapped the animal on the rump to start it back to its graze. And then, as he turned to move through the shadows to

the ranch, he heard the blast of a shot.

It was a distant sound, echoing and re-echoing. It sent a feeling of alarm through his lean body—but he shrugged it aside, knowing that none of Benlaw's men would come to the R tonight. Stub Ensley or some other nighthawk must have taken a shot at a coyote, he decided.

At breakfast next morning Judy put her lips close to Lon's ear as she put a platter of hotcakes on the table. "I didn't have a chance to talk to you last night, Lon. Right after breakfast I want to tell you—"

"Where's everybody at?" old Ben demanded querulously. "Damn it, I thought I heard a shot last night, an' now there's nobody here to tell me—"

Clane Baggott stalked into the room then. He was alone, and he was darkly sure of himself now. "It's come, Boss. They hit us last night. One of 'em sneaked over an' shot old Stub Ensley, out there with the gather. Shot him in the back, about midnight, an' left him there. One of the boys heard the shot an' investigated, but by the time he got to Stub it was too late."

LON pushed back his plate. It was an unhurried move, the move of a man who knows that the thing for which he has been setting himself has come. He rose slowly to his feet.

"Y'hear that, Lon?" old Ben was demanding. "They've hit us. They've murdered one of my men!"

"Midnight, you say?" Lon fired the question at Baggott.

Warned by the tone of it, Baggott swung to face him. "I said that, mister. But if you know what's good for you, you'll keep out of this."

Lon let that go by him. "What makes you so sure it was one of Benlaw's hombres?" he demanded.

That put Baggott on the defensive, and the man liked that position not at all.

His gaunt cheeks seemed to draw in visibly. "The hombre was seen! The boys saw him, ridin' this way from them homestead outfits. They tried to circle 'im, but he slipped away from them."

"Likely they didn't try very hard," Lon said coldly. "You shot Stub yourself—or it was done at your orders. You cold-blooded devil, you killed a man just to start your fight rollin'. You figured the presence of a Benlaw man on our range gave you the setup you needed. What you didn't savvy was that it was no man of Benlaw's that you saw. It was me. If there'd been any of the homesteaders riding that range last night, I'd have seen him. You an' me will finish this outside, Baggott."

Baggott's deep-set eyes blazed, first with fury and then with something else, something that was tempered with cunning. He glanced toward Judy, and then a wry smile came to his face and he spread his hands. "I was only tryin' to do my job, Madison."

"What?" yelled old Ben Ryan from the table. "Are you sayin', Baggott, that you—"

Baggott's gun seemed to leap into his hand, then. It bucked and thundered. And even as he made a despairing try for his own weapon Lon Madison knew that for the second time he'd been caught flatfooted by the suddenness of the man. With no idea that Baggott would resort to gunfire in here where a bullet might strike Judy or her father, he had expected a personal attack. But never this.

The bullet's impact was a sickening jolt that threw all control from Lon's lean body. He felt himself falling, heard the thud of his own weapon as it fell from his fingers and struck the floor.

Then he was down. And as if down an echoing hallway that grew longer and longer he heard Baggott's voice.

"That'll keep 'im! Me an' the boys are smashin' them homesteaders for you,

Ryan. We'll finish the job an' then we'll ride. Judy, you be ready to go with me."

"No!" Judy cried. Lon realized that she was bending over him, her hands trying to lift him and her tears falling on his cheek. "No! Clane Baggott, you're through at the R! Get out!"

Baggott laughed, then. "All right. Stay with a blind man an' a dead one if you want. There's lots of other very pretty gals around."

"Wait," Ben Ryan ordered, doubt rising in his voice. "I ain't sure about this—"

"You don't have to be," Baggott retorted. "Me an' the boys took your money—be a shame if we didn't finish the job, wouldn't it?"

He was gone, then, stalking out of the house. And Lon Madison knew that Stub had been tragically right about the man—he was in love with war, a killer who'd strut his chosen role until somebody stopped him.

Lon struggled to rise, the hard core of him forcing back his pain and clearing his head. He was hit somewhere in the side; his left leg was useless. "My gun," he said thickly. "Where's it at?"

Judy was trying to force him to lie still. "Lon!" she cried. "Oh, Lon, what have I done?"

But he found the gun, then. And clenching his hand about it he hitched himself along the floor, across the threshold and out onto the porch.

Baggott was mounting up, shouting to his men who were bunched down at the corral.

Lon threw his challenge at the man. Saw Baggott find his easy seat in the saddle and bring his mount around to face the porch, his gun rising and then swinging down in a sure arc. "You take a lot of killin'—" Baggott said.

Then Lon was firing, through the posts

of the porch rail. And Baggott was spilling from his saddle, unbelief and horror on his face.

Lon saw Baggott's men spur their mounts toward the house, saw them come to a sudden halt beyond sixgun range. And he knew that Judy was beside him, resting a rifle across the porch railing . . .

He lay on a cot on that porch, the first day the doctor allowed him to leave his room. Old Ben Ryan perched on the rail, chattering about his plans for getting summer range in the mountains, and for raising winter feed on the flats.

"No reason why we can't run more stock than we ever did, Lon! Them homesteaders will let us put in ditches to carry water to the flats. They been reasonable as I could ask, ever since they heard the sound of shootin' over here an' rode over to help Judy an' me run off Baggott's crew. I was wrong when I hired that devil. But I was scared, Lon—afraid of what would happen to Judy an' to the R when I was gone. She'd marry some hombre that couldn't plan, I figured. An' damn a man that can't look ahead . . ."

Judy came out with some coffee for Lon, then. Old Ben made his tactful retreat, fumbling his way awkwardly into the house.

Lon said, "You knew I'd stay."

She colored and in momentary confusion she lifted her head and looked out across the range, her eyes clear and far-seeing. "All my hopes were for that. I—I guess I'm a bold woman, Lon."

He looked up at her and found her lovely and infinitely desirable. "I'll speak my piece now," he said, trying to rise. my piece now," he said trying feebly to rise.

parted and her eyes full of promise. "Yes," she told him. "But there's no need to be formal, Lon. I've got it all planned. . ."



Big Boss Taggart figured he was holding the reins on the freighting business—until a gun-handy stranger drifted into town on a . . .

BOOTHILL ERRAND

OLD Ben Vines had swung around at Taggart's gruff hail. The bearded little man screwed his leathery features into an almost pained grimace as he squinted against the harsh glare of the mid-morning sun, peering with watery eyes up into the face of the burly, heavy-shouldered horseman. As he listened to Taggart's words, an angry surge of red came up into his face.

"Dammit, Taggart!" he broke in warmly. "This is the third time this year you've raised your freightin' charges! The merchants here in town won't stand for it! Already we're payin' five times what we ought to!"

Taggart shrugged his heavy-muscled shoulders under the expensively-tailored black coat. "Of course, if you don't want to pay my price for hawling in your sup-

By RICK LONG

plies, that's all right with me. But you ain't going to stay in business very long if you ain't got nothing to sell in your store."

Ben Vines lowered his gaze to the hard-crusted ruts of the street. A moment later, he said, "Taggart, you're a fool if you go through with this. You're likely to find it's the biggest mistake you ever made!"

Taggart's eyes narrowed. "What you mean by that?"

The old man looked uneasy. He remained silent for a long moment, then lifted his faded blue eyes and fixed them defiantly on the face of the horseman. "If you drive us to it, the merchants in this town might have an ace up their sleeve. Maybe we'll organize our own freightin' concern and bring in the stuff we need in our own wagons."

Taggart stiffened in his saddle and his glance hardened.

"Try that!" he snarled. "Try that—and see how long any of you stay in business!"

Taggart was about to ride on when he saw the old man's gaze move up the street. He turned in the saddle and let his dark and arrogant glance rest upon the rider coming into town.

The stranger was a slender young man, wearing a greasy white Stetson and well-worn boots. Taggart noted swiftly his boyish face, and the shabby-looking gun belt and wooden-handled gun that rode his hip. He rode toward them at a leisurely trot, giving the false-fronted buildings on either side a curious scrutiny from pale, expressionless grey eyes. Fifty yards away, in front of the Stockmen's Hotel, he dismounted, tied his pony and disappeared through the entrance.

Taggart frowned. "Another shiftless saddle-tramp. Too many of them have been drifting into these parts lately. I reckon I'll have to speak to Sheriff Withers about it."

The storekeeper made no reply.

Later, in his office in the wagon yard, Taggart considered what should be done about Ben Vines. That old man could be dangerous. Taggart did not doubt that this idea of a rival freighting outfit had started with Vines. The rest of the town's merchants might grumble and complain, but they had too much respect for the guns of himself and his men to try to do anything about it. But Ben Vines was a stubborn, unreasonable old coot....

Once before he had attempted to interfere.

Taggart had arrived in town about a year before. He had immediately bought an interest in the Mile-High Freighting Company, run by three brothers. Within a month, two of the brothers had been killed in accidents. The third brother, Fred Willis, a rash, hot-headed young man, had openly voiced his suspicions about the nature of the accidents that had taken his brothers' lives.

Taggart had sought him out at the mercantile with the intention of goading him into drawing his gun and then killing him. But, at the last moment, Ben Vines had nearly spoiled everything. Up to that moment, Taggart had posed as a business man and nothing more. Nobody in town suspected his quick, deadly skill with the gun strapped about his middle. But somehow, the storekeeper must have sensed the truth. He had stepped between the two with a word of warning to the other man. A sudden caution had come into the eyes of the remaining Willis brother.

In a sudden rage, Taggart had reached for Ben Vines, caught him by the front of the shirt. He had snatched the gun from his holster and slammed its barrel viciously against the little storekeeper's head. Vines had clumped to the floor like a sack of potatoes.

Willis, forgetting his caution of the moment before, reached for the gun in his belt. Taggart whirled quickly and

shot the man between the eyes before he could get his hardware clear of the leather....

TAGGART straightened in his chair and his thoughts returned to the present. Of course, he could always take care of Ben Vines as he had Fred Willis and those others who had gotten in his way since then. But the little storekeeper had a host of friends throughout the valley and his killing might possibly lead to unpleasant repercussions.

Shortly before noon, Taggart left his office and walked down in the direction of Ma O'Toole's Eating Place across from the hotel. Just then the youthful drifter he had watched ride into town emerged from the hotel. He sauntered down into the street, untied the big sorrel standing at the hitch-rail, and began to lead the animal up the street towards the livery stable.

A sudden flicker of inspiration crossed Taggart's face. He stepped down off the plank sidewalk, and called out sharply.

The sorrel's owner spun around and his pale grey eyes took in the burly man with a single, swift glance.

"You heading for the livery?" Taggart's voice was curt, unfriendly.

On closer inspection, the stranger seemed to be hardly more than nineteen. His eyes held a curious blankness that seemed to mask his inner thoughts and feelings. He didn't say anything, merely gave a little nod, his eyes watchful.

"Figuring on putting up your horse and staying in town a while, eh?"

"Reckon so. Why?"

"Save yourself the trouble," Taggart advised harshly. "This town ain't got no place for drifters and saddle-bums."

The boyish features betrayed the faintest hint of surprise. "Sounds almost like you was tellin' me to hi-tail out of town?"

"Ain't nothing the matter with your hearing. You got exactly an hour."

"Thanks, mister." A lazy grin crawled across the youth's face. "You'll find me over there—" he nodded at the Bull's Head Saloon opposite where they stood—"when the hour's up."

He turned and moved away.

As Taggart started back towards the restaurant, men standing on the saloon porch and others in the doorways further up the street stared at him curiously.

The burly man turned in at Ma O'Toole's place and sat down at a table near the door. He hoped that drifter kid didn't lose his nerve and ride out of town before the showdown. He decided they needed to be reminded that neither his hand nor his eye had lost any of their deadly skill. And especially Ben Vines needed to be reminded of that fact....

It was curious that, glancing up from his steak at that precise moment, Taggart should catch a glimpse through the restaurant window of the little storekeeper hurrying past on the opposite side of the street. He abruptly pushed back his chair, tossed a coin on the table, and stepped into the street.

Taggart angled swiftly across the street and followed the little man, walking with hurried strides. Just as Vines was about to enter the Bull's Head Saloon, Taggart called loudly, "What's your hurry, Ben?"

The old man spun jerkily, surprise and apprehension on his bearded features. After a moment he swallowed hard, managed to stammer out, "Just wanted to see if a customer of mine was here."

Taggart grinned. "Well, come on then! What you waiting for?" He pushed one of the batwings wide and held it for the other to enter. Vines glanced nervously up the street, then hesitantly stepped inside.

As they moved across the room, Taggart saw that the youthful drifter was one of the men lined up at the bar. At the sudden hush that fell across the room, he turned slowly, whiskey glass still in

hand. A lazy smile lingered in the corners of his boyish mouth.

TAGGART heard old Ben Vines draw in his breath sharply. He glanced around and discovered the old man staring at the youth with a strange, half-astonished intensity. Vines blinked his eyes several times, then stepped closer to the stranger. Suddenly he blurted, "Billy—it is you! Fer a moment there I figured I was seein' things! Remember me? Ben Vines? I had a store back in Fort Bowie when you was there a couple of years ago."

Then, before the young stranger could make any reply, the little storekeeper sang out, "Boys, this is a gent you've all heard about plenty! Billy Bonney. Some folks calls him Billy the Kid!"

The room was very quiet. Taggart felt a dryness in his mouth, and a numbing sense of shock began to creep along his spine. He saw the saloon's patrons edging back away from both him and the stranger.

There was awe in their shocked faces as they stared at the youthful figure beside the bar.

But then a frown spread across Taggart's face.

There was certainly something damned queer about this! The recollection of how he and Ben Vines had watched the youth ride into town flashed through his mind. The rider had come to within fifty yards of where they had been standing, yet Vines had given no hint of recognition. And now, suddenly, the old man leaps forward and makes a show of recognizing him as the gun-handly Kid. Somehow it didn't add up.

Taggart felt anger burn up into his face. His eyes narrowed, and some of the old arrogance and self-assurance came back into his manner as he stood looking at the young stranger.

"Hell!" Taggart's voice was sharp with disgust. "This ain't Billy the Kid! Mister, I'll bet you never been within a hundred and fifty miles of Lincoln County!"

The flat grey eyes looked across the room and the stranger said, in his easy drawl, "What difference does it make who I am? You gave me an hour to vamoose out of here. Hour's about up, I reckon, and I'm still here. What you fixin' to do about it?"

The lazy insolence in the young man's tone struck angry sparks from Taggart's eyes. "You asked for it!" he snarled. "Then take it!"

At the same instant, his hand moved with the suddenness of a striking sidewinder.

But just a split second later he knew it hadn't been swift enough.

Something seemed to explode inside of his chest and his whole body went numb. He was vaguely aware that the gun he was trying to bring up was sliding from his fingers and that there was nothing he could do about it. Already a crimson fog seemed to be settling across his eyes, blotting out the room. He heard the sound as his gun struck the floor. Then he was on his knees and the whole world seemed to be crashing to an end. Dimly he realized that it was.

His world. . .

"Looks like you finished him, Billy." That was Ben Vines speaking. "Whatever got into him? He ought to of known he couldn't out-shoot you!" Vines paused a moment, then added: "Funny I didn't recognize you when you first rode in, Billy. Fact is, my eyes ain't much good any more. Wasn't nothin' the matter with 'em up to about a year ago when they started gettin' bad. Ever since that hombre on the floor clouted me across the skull with that deadly hog-leg of his'n. . ."

BOOM-CAMP

When Redbeard's Bend pointed the finger of doom at gambler Sleepy Dick, he had to play out one desperate lone-hand game—with Death as the banker.



By

**ROBERT E.
MAHAFFAY**



*Smashing Novelette
of a Gambler's
Courage*

GALLOWS

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Sleepy Dick's thumbs choked him off.

CHAPTER

Dri^gter's Fight

1

High among the Idaho Sawtooths, the gold camp called Redbeard's Bend had been snowed in since early December. Even after two months of enforced isolation there would have been no difficulty, perhaps, had it not been for the gun battle

between a half-breed and a drunk bartender. They killed each other neatly, and no one regretted it. The regret was for the fact that a stray bullet struck a case of dynamite in the lean-to of the combination store and saloon.

The blast wiped out to the last keg of the camp's reserve whiskey, together with most of the canned food.

Actually, the bartender had not been drunk. He had been promised ten ounces of the breed's dust in return for the breed's death. . . .

At the rear of the rickety saloon, near the jagged hole which had been freshly logged up, two men were wrangling bitterly. Big Bart McCarver pulled sullenly at one of the few remaining bottles of whiskey. He growled, "How in hell did I know the breed was fast enough to heat his iron? It was a fluke shot, anyhow. He was dead when he pulled the trigger."

Pock Smeed, a cadaverous, rat-like individual, whimpered angrily. "Don't matter if it was a fluke or not. Where's our profits coming from now? That's what I want to know."

Bart McCarver grinned cruelly at his partner. He hated him with the contemptuous hatred of a strong and ruthless scoundrel for a weak and scurrilous one. He had brought Pock into the mountains only because he had needed his money to stock the saloon. He had promised fabulous returns, and they had been fairly on the road to achieving them when the explosion had ruined their game.

"There's more'n one way of turnin' a profit in a gold camp," said Bart McCarver.

Smeed recoiled under the sneering scrutiny of his partner's hard black eyes. "I don't hold wit killing, Bart," he protested weakly. "I told you trying to do in that breed was a mistake."

"Shut up. The whole damn camp'll hear you. I don't need you, anyhow."

Pock Smeed writhed in his chair. "I'll string along, Bart. You know that. Only—only—"

McCarver laughed harshly. Pock Smeed was desperately afraid that his partner would double-cross him now that the pinch had come.

"There ain't a man in this room," snapped McCarver, "that ain't got a cache big enough to make you an' me rich. We're

diggin' some of 'em out! And soon, too!"

Pock Smeed's harried gaze swung to the front part of the room. A dozen miners were sprawled around the crimson, crackling stove—rugged, bearded men who were calmly wagering their lives against the gold dust to be found along the creek bed. A man had to be hard to stick out a winter in the Sawtooths. There was one among them who wasn't hard, but he was no miner.

Soft, strands of melody were flowing from the battered fiddle tucked under his chin. His eyes, which were a watery blue, and blank, stared unseeingly straight before him. Where the bridge of his nose met his forehead there was an ugly scar made by a bullet.

Blind Tom had no business being in the gold camp of Redbeard's Bend. But he was there. With the wind howling its twenty-below threat outside, Blind Tom and his fiddle made the interior more than welcome.

Pock Smeed's gaze traveled around the crude log walls, and back again to the knot of miners. He was afraid of them. He always had been. "They'd hang a cache robber soon as look at him," he whispered hoarsely. "It just ain't worth it, Bart."

Bart McCarver gulped more of the whiskey. "They'll hang somebody, sure enough, but not us. It could be proved," he continued after a pointed halt, "it could be proved that Tom there was doin' the robbin'."

Pock Smeed stared in stupefied disbelief. "Tom? You're plain crazy, man! He's blind!"

"How do you know?" snarled Bart McCarver. "You think he is on account of that scar an' the way he acts. Suppose we made out he ain't blind, but only pretends to be. If he was to git killed, right after it'd been made out he was doin' the robbin', nobody'd ever be positive of it or know for sure!"

McCARVER looked up sharply. In the forepart of the room someone had shouted. Snow was whirling in through the open door. Broad, mackinawed backs jammed the aperture. McCarver sprang toward them as they half dragged, half supported the snow-covered figure of a man into the room and stretched him on the floor.

McCarver watched contemptuously as the miners unbuckled the unconscious man's webs, rubbed his frozen face and hands. Rumbling comment now drifted up about the newcomer.

"It's Sleepy Dick," Bart McCarver stated coldly. "I've gambled with him." Already new schemes were beginning to flood through Bart McCarver's head.

It was three days before Sleepy Dick was on his feet again. He headed at once for the saloon. There McCarver drew him into a corner and paid him the honor of breaking out a bottle from the fast-dwindling liquor supply. Over the glass, as they drank, he studied the gambler.

Sleepy Dick—the rest of his name had been lost somewhere among the mountain gold camps—returned the inspection from weary gray eyes over which the lids were continually half dropped.

After that exchange, an indefinable tension surged up between the two men. Unspoken but understood, it was a matter of some remote instinct. It was a wary measuring of strength, like the circling of wolves before combat.

Bart McCarver motioned toward the bottle. "Have another," he said. "What did you come up here for?"

"Took a notion," drawled Sleepy Dick. Shabbily clothed and slouched in the split-cedar chair, he looked like a small man. He wasn't. It was the badly-fitting coat which disguised the uncanny breadth of shoulder and the iron-hard torso.

"To hell with that," spat McCarver. "Not many gents could get in here. Only a damn fool would try it. You did, an'

you made it. And I want to know why."

"Put that way, McCarver, it's clearer. I come because I took a damn good notion."

McCarver turned red under his dirty smear of beard. An angry oath struggled to his lips, but he checked it. He had heard that Sleepy Dick was slow in his mind as well as on his feet. But for a slow-witted man Sleepy Dick had an extraordinary amount of luck at poker. Bart McCarver could use that.

"All right," McCarver snapped. "I need a gambler here. What about it?"

Sleepy Dick shrugged. "I ain't broke enough to gamble. I don't gamble till I have to."

"Man, you'll never have a better chance. This camp is ready for a clean-in'. They took out plenty 'fore the snow come. With the right backin', a gambler could make his fortune."

"An' yours," amended Sleepy Dick. "But I didn't come up here to gamble."

He stood up. His shoulders and head drooped as if weighted by a perpetual fatigue. No one credited Sleepy Dick with much skill at anything.

He shuffled off. With the studied deliberation he gave to the slightest movement he made, he sought out Blind Tom who was seated in a corner, polishing his fiddle with a bit of rag. Perhaps Sleepy Dick's veiled gray eyes saw more than the world supposed. It was nine years since he had seen the man who was now Blind Tom. He was struck by the thin, pinched face of the blind man, the wisps of thin gray hair which straggled down almost to his shoulders.

The blind man raised his head, almost as if to direct his gaze at the man who stood beside him. But the eyes were blank and lifeless. "So you didn't come here to gamble?"

"Heard that, did you?"

"A blind man hears a lot of things he ain't supposed to."

"I reckon."

Blind Tom said carefully, "Your voice is like somebody's I knew quite a while ago."

"Lots of voices sound alike."

There was a silence, and then Sleepy Dick asked awkwardly, "How do you get along here, Tom?"

The blind man said quickly, "How'd you know my name?"

"They told me down below there was a fiddler called Blind Tom up at Red-beard's Bend."

"Oh. . . I get along all right. I get grub from McCarver for fiddlin' evenings. He lets me sleep here too. It don't get cold till around mornin', when the fire goes out."

"How you aim to get back in the spring? You can't travel alone."

"I have. Mostly, though, there's miners that'll take me along with 'em. That's how I get around."

Sleepy Dick, watching the blind man's lined face, saw what courage forbade his putting into words—the grim struggle of a blind oldster to survive under conditions which broke many a strong man.

Sleepy Dick put out a hand to touch one of the narrow, sagging shoulders. There was friendliness in the gesture, perhaps more friendliness than Blind Tom had ever encountered. "Minin' country ain't a place for a blind man, Tom," he said earnestly. "Why not pick somethin' easier?"

"The easier thing ain't what I'm after. I'm lookin' for a man."

THE day following, Sleepy Dick was lounging in the saloon when a huge yellow-bearded miner burst into the shanty. The door crashed shut behind him. He stood with booted feet spread apart, fists clenched, his furious bloodshot eyes lashing over the occupants of the little room.

His voice strident with anger, he bel-

lowed, "A cache robber's loose in camp, boys! I had six thousand buried under the old stump back of the cabin, an' she's gone. When I get the skunk that done it I'm pullin' him apart with my hands!"

A miner shouted, "By cripes, I'll be helpin' you!" Men leaped to their feet.

Big Bart McCarver quelled the riot of bitter voices by hammering a brawny fist on the bar. "The man that done it is somewhere in camp," he cried. "He can't get out. The saloon's puttin' up fifty ounces for the gent that nails him!"

Terror stamped his face. Pock Smeed cowered in a corner.

The next week saw two more cache robberies, saw the camp whipped to a feverish pitch. Few of the miners stored their gold inside the cabins strung along the creek. From universal habit they had selected some remote corner of the claim. The cache—a rotten log, a stump, a rocky crevice—was a place to be visited rarely, usually when darkness screened off prying eyes.

Hence, the steady looting of the caches indicated that someone had devoted long night vigils to spying out the places of concealment. It was a furtive and perilous business, but it had been carried out successfully.

No one drew what might have been an obvious conclusion from the fact that Pock Smeed spent little time in the saloon of nights. Big Bart McCarver explained contemptuously that his partner was too spineless to resist the cold and was confined to his bunk.

Most of the time Sleepy Dick spent lounging inconspicuously in the saloon. He accepted as inevitable the fact that he was under suspicion. He was the newcomer in camp. He was a gambler. His gray eyes under their deceptive, half-dropped lids roved shrewdly, watching Big Bart McCarver.

Cannily, McCarver was fanning the

(Please continue on page 116)

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(Continued from page 114)

blaze of the miners' wrath. A word dropped here, a threat harshly blurted there, were goading the camp into a mad fury which reason could not check. With cunning and skill Big Bart McCarver was laying the powder train to the explosion.

It came with a startling suddenness which caught Sleepy Dick off his guard.

It was a raw, freezing dawn, and Sleepy Dick was pulling on his boots by the stove in the cabin he had appropriated. A cry sheered through the biting air—a thin cry which the gambler recognized. Even before he had whipped open the door he knew that it came from Blind Tom.

Outside a drizzle of snow was falling. Clad only in trousers, underwear and boots, Sleepy Dick plunged into it. He saw vaguely that from other cabins nearer to the saloon scantily-clothed miners stumbled out, as he was doing, toward the saloon.

In front of the crude building stood Big Bart McCarver, bulky and threatening in the mass of sifting flakes. He was bare-headed, his voice rocketed between the banks of the creek in a furious bellow: "Here's your damned cache robber! Here's the double-crossin' skunk!" His left hand was knotted in the ragged coat collar of Blind Tom.

As he plowed through the knee-deep snow, Sleepy Dick saw McCarver's fist swing back, smash into the blind man's face. Blind Tom went down.

Other figures cut between them then. McCarver's shouting drove against Sleepy Dick's eardrums like thunder: "Blind? He ain't any more blind than I am! Just caught him red-handed, with a sack of my dust in his fiddle. He's fooled us all!"

Like a beast tearing its way out of a deadfall, Sleepy Dick slogged through the men between, drove at Big Bart McCarver! McCarver's hairy fist struck him but did not stop him.

Crashing backward, with Sleepy Dick's hands clawing for his throat, McCarver screamed, "The gambler's in on it, too. Get him! Kill him!" But Sleepy Dick's thumbs choked him off.

There in the whirling snow, the lust for retribution which had been festering in the gold camp of Redbeard's Bend, exploded. Miners left for Sleepy Dick. He was smothered in a swarm of fighting bodies, trying to stave off a savage onslaught of crushing fists and flailing, hobnailed boots.

Gone now was the gambler's weariness, his slow-moving deliberation. He was fighting like a demon, and for the first moments it seemed that he could not be whipped. He went to his knees, fought upright again, flinging men from his shoulders. But they came at him from every side, swept over him. He went down into the blood-stained snow, and there he took the brutal punishment of the boots. But the agony of his fight was soon blotted out by a sweeping darkness. . . .

CHAPTER

2

Blood-Marked Cards

When consciousness filtered back to him, he was lying bound on the floor of the saloon. Figures took shape vaguely. As Sleepy Dick singled out McCarver he saw the man jerk his pistol from his belt and level it swiftly at Blind Tom who was tied in one of the sapling chairs.

The yellow-bearded miner who had lost his gold struck the weapon aside as the hammer dropped. "Slow down," he ripped out. "How in the devil can he tell where he hid the dust if he's dead? We ain't even certain-sure he done it. Damm it all, a blind man—"

"He ain't blind," snarled McCarver. "He comes into camp, makin' out he's blind, an' watches his chance to bust into a cache. He says he can't see, but

I know different! Your cache was robbed, wasn't it, Converse?"

The yellow-bearded Converse nodded grimly. "That's why I'm makin' sure the gent that did it ain't killed before I get my hands on the dust again." He looked hard at Bart McCarver. "What makes you so blamed certain Blind Tom done it?"

McCarver returned the stare bleakly. "Caught him at it."

The blind man sat hunched in the chair. "How'd you catch him?" demanded Converse.

McCarver tossed a sneering glance at the blind man. "I keep my money in a strong box in my room, just yonder there, like most of you know. Just as it was gettin' light I heard somebody movin'. Then I seen Tom here. He'd pried open the box an' was just slippin' a sack of dust into that hole in his fiddle. He seen I'd caught him an' made a jump for the door, but he wasn't fast enough. Hell, if you don't believe me, ask Smeed. He come in on the tail end of it. Or look inside the fiddle. She's layin' right where she fell when I jumped Tom, an' if there ain't a sack in it with my mark, I'll eat it."

Converse was scowling as he ran horny fingers through his beard. "That right, Smeed? Happened like that, did it?"

Pock Smeed trembled as he came forward. In the early light the scars on his cadaverous face showed black. He wiped the sweat away from his lips with his tongue. "It happened that way, all right. Tom came running out of Bart's room, not stumbling like a blind man would. It—it was sure a surprise to me—seeing him run when I'd thought all along he was blind."

The fiddle was lying smashed on the floor. One of the miners scooped it up. There was a ripping sound as he tore away some of the thin wood. There was



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a stifled cry, too, from Blind Tom who until now had not parted his lips.

The miner drew out a tanned leather sack. Branded on it was the letter M.

In a cold flat voice Converse said: "If you got talkin' to do, Tom, do it fast."

From where he lay, Sleepy Dick could see the blind man dimly. Waves of pain were blurring his vision.

Blind Tom's head came up slowly. There was no hint of anger or fear or disappointment on the pinched features of his face. His hat was gone and the long thin strands of his gray hair were still wet from the snow.

"It's a lie, all of it," he said. "I never was in McCarver's room. I slept later'n I usually do. Mostly it's so cold along toward mornin' I got to wake up. Somebody kept the fire goin' last night, so I didn't. First thing I knew, McCarver was shoutin'. Then he hauled me outside."

"Think he'd claim anythin' different?" snorted McCarver. "His word against Pock Smeed's an' mine is what you got to go on."

The yellow-bearded Converse challenged Blind Tom harshly, "Are you blind, or ain't you?"

The answer came so softly it was barely a whisper. "I'm blind. I been blind for nine years."

"He means," McCarver flung back at him callously, "he's been robbin' and cheatin' for nine years. Hell, do you think I'd lay a hand on the poor devil if I knowed he couldn't see? But I know different. I tell you I seen him doin' what no blind ever do. He was robbin' me an' I caught him at it. You boys goin' to stand by while he does the same to you?"

The challenge stirred up a mutter of sullen denial around the room. Though the cost in pain was terrific, Sleepy Dick wrenched savagely at his bonds.

"He's blind!" he croaked. You damned fools, he's blind! A bullet done it to him—nine years ago!" Sleepy Dick was staring at the yellow-bearded Converse and at the pinched face of Blind Tom. "Tom ain't the man you want," he blurted suddenly. "I done the cache robin. Tom never had a hand in it."

McCarver looked down at the limp figure of Sleepy Dick. "You'll get your chance to talk when we're through with him." He turned back to the group of miners and said, "Well?"

Scowling, his feet spread apart, Converse stated grimly. "Any man that figgers Tom ain't blind, that he stole the gold an' knows where it's hid, say so now."

The work that McCarver had done now brought its result. Unsure at first, voices broke out, then swept to a clamor.

"You heard 'em, Tom," Converse bit out. "You goin' to talk, or do we make you?"

"Go ahead," said the blind man. "You'll know when you're through that I didn't have anything to tell you . . ."

SOME time later Sleepy Dick came partially to his senses again, but the nightmare which was transpiring in that room in the gold camp of Redbeard's Bend, penetrated to him only in foggy snatches.

Not a sound had come from the blind man. He had not spoken.

At last someone said, "He's fainted."

"Then cart him away some place. I've had all I want," said another.

While the miners picked up Blind Tom, others came over and looked at Sleepy Dick. Then they carried him and Blind Tom into Pock Smeed's room and left them there.

There was no window in the room. Sleepy Dick lay there in the darkness, cramped and aching in the strips of rawhide which secured his wrists and ankles.

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At intervals he called softly to Blind Tom, but he got no answer. Occasionally Bart McCarver came into the room, squinted at them in the light from the open door, and went out again.

It must have been nearly dusk outside when Blind Tom came to his senses enough to talk. Through the dark he murmured, "How you makin' out—gambler?"

There was a curious, choked relief in Sleepy Dick's voice when he answered. "Thank heaven, Tom. I thought they'd rubbed you out."

"Not yet, but I reckon they will. It don't matter."

"It does to me."

"You've done enough—already, gambler. You said that minin' country was no place for a blind man. Well—you win." Blind Tom sighed.

Between his teeth Sleepy Dick said, "McCarver an' Smeed—they done the cache robbin', Tom, an' framed the job on you."

There was silence for a time. Blind Tom broke it by saying, "I knew McCarver was bad. But I didn't think any man livin'—would do—that he has. It don't matter now. I'll never see—another daylight, gambler."

Awkwardly, fumbling for his words, Sleepy Dick said, "Forget that, Tom. You ain't dyin'. You—you got a man to find first." He waited, listening to the blind man's breathing.

"Yeah, I kind of wanted to locate that gent. Too late now, seems like."

"Maybe it ain't, Tom. Listen: I got a hunch that now the edge is wore off, some of the boys ain't goin' to be so willin' to give you the works again. Next time McCarver comes in, you act like you was still one jump ahead of boothill."

"If they turn me loose, gambler, they'll start in again on you."

"I ain't called a gambler for nothin', Tom."

McCarver and another man came in shortly after that. While the other was bending over Blind Tom, Sleepy Dick whispered distinctly to McCarver: "Come back alone. I got somethin' to tell you."

It was all of an hour before McCarver returned, but he came, slanting the rays of his lantern suspiciously over the gambler. Apparently a reaction had set in among the miners, and the weight of their disapproval was falling on McCarver.

"Talk fast," he advised in a surly voice.

"McCarver, 'bout a week ago you asked me why I trekked in here. Here's why:

"Last summer there was a strike made not more'n a dozen miles from here. A strike so rich it makes Redbeard's Bend look like a low-grade dump. One man made it. He was sick an' he went out to find a sawbones. He died down in the valley, but not 'fore he'd give a map to another man. That man was me."

"You got the map?"

"In my head, McCarver."

"You're lying."

"Think so? Why else would a man risk his life gettin' into a place like this? All right. I'm lying. Forget about it."

McCarver growled, "Wait a minute. What do you want me to do?"

"Untie me. All I want now is a chance to get out of here with my hide."

"You can't make it."

"I'll take that chance. I'd rather freeze to death than take what they'd give me in there," He jerked his head toward the saloon.

IN THE lamplight Sleepy Dick's half-closed eyes probed at Big Bart McCarver. He could guess what McCarver was thinking. McCarver was in a tight spot with the camp. Done on the spur of the moment, the beating of Blind Tom had been followed by an angry reaction. A break on the part of the gambler would relieve the tension, would divert concrete

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suspicion toward him. Sleepy Dick's capture and death would be sure.

"I'd hate to see them get after you," said McCarver. "You an' me can talk business. Spill your story."

"I don't bet on a hand till I see it," said Sleepy Dick. "Untie me first."

Cursing under his breath, McCarver knelt down, pried at the knots. "I got a gun," he warned.

Reaching for the door, Sleepy Dick pulled himself upright. His arms and legs were numb. He beat his hands together, shuffled his feet, disregarding McCarver's whispered commands for haste. During the long interval of confinement he had strained at the rawhide so that circulation had not been entirely cut off.

Suspicious of the delay, McCarver now jammed his gun into the gambler's stomach, and snarled, "Talk, an' do it quick!"

"Sure," drawled Sleepy Dick. "Listen close, McCarver." He was gazing over McCarver's shoulder, and on his poker face there dawned abruptly a look of stunned amazement. "I'll be damned," he burst out, "Blind Tom done killed himself!"

McCarver's head swung around, then started to jerk back as he sensed the ruse. But in that fleeting instant Sleepy Dick's swinging fist hit him under the ear. He caught McCarver as he fell, eased him to the floor. Then he dug a jack-knife out of McCarver's pocket and slashed at the thoughts which held Blind Tom.

"Tough luck, gambler," the blind man whispered. "I can hardly move."

"You'll rest some easier, anyhow. If anybody comes in, play dead."

Weakly the blind man sought out the other's hand, pressed it. "I'm thinkin' you for what you done. Hope you make it out of here, feller."

Sleepy Dick, gambler, grinned. "I ain't goin' out. I aim to see if maybe I can drum up a game of stud."

Bart McCarver was beginning to stir as Sleepy Dick lifted the pistol from his fingers. Holding the weapon against his side, stumbling a little as he walked, the gambler went out into the short corridor and stepped a pace or two into the saloon.

All of the camp was there, jammed inside the mud-chinked log walls. For a moment no one picked him out. Then an oath cracked over the hubbub. Men grew tense as their eyes swiveled to where he stood. Few men would have recognized in that bloody, weaving figure the Sleepy Dick who was known in the mountain gold camps from the Sierras to the Canadian line. His hands were bruised and his face swollen.

They had done it to him—the men who were facing him now. The gambler cocked the gun in his right fist. The black muzzle cut steadily to the right and left. "Don't move, gents. I'll shoot the first man that does. I got some talkin' to do."

He slid along the end of the room to the bar, and eased his back against it for support.

Sleepy Dick said: "Blind Tom's in that room, dyin'. I reckon you're mighty proud of what you done to him. The whole damned gang of you workin' on one lone blind man!"

The words rang in the little room. Sleepy Dick's left hand curled hard around the edge of the bar, checking the passion which was making him forget what he had intended to do. Into the bitter silence his next words broke icily:

"I told you before that I'm the gent who stole your dust. I'm tellin' you again now. She's hid where you'll play hell findin' it. There's one man who knows where to put his hands on it, an' that's me! You've got me. I know that. My life ain't worth a busted flush as she stands! But, boys, till you get your fingers on that gold, my life's worth plenty to you!"

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A snap of Sleepy Dick's wrist turned the muzzle of the sixgun in against his own temple. Someone in the room swore.

"If I die—an' I'd a damned sight rather die with a slug in my head than I would after you boys had worked on me—you'll rot before you uncover your dust. I'm a gamblin' man, an' I want a gambler's chance. I got maybe a couple hundred dollars on me—my own money, earned honest. I'll gamble with that against all the money you want to put up. You can back yourselves with every ounce of dust there is in camp. If you clean me out you can put a rope around my neck."

"Easy now!" was Converse's warning to the men about him. He glared at Sleepy Dick. "An' if you win?"

"You all know how much chance two hundred bucks has in a game backed by thousands. If I win, me an' Blind Tom walk out of here with our lives an' the gold I've won."

A miner growled, "Why in hell gamble with him? We got him, ain't we?"

Converse checked the storm of angry comment with a bellow. "Hold on! He'd be no good to us dead. Right now he's got the top hand. Thing to do is break him an' then give him his needin's. There'll be plenty of us to see that the game runs on the square."

Sleepy Dick said drily, "Nobody ever called me a tinhorn. I ain't startin' now. That goes both ways, Converse. I'm trustin' you for a square deal."

"You'll get it. If you win honest, you'll go free. If you don't—"

Sleepy Dick tucked the gun in his waistband, and sat down to gamble for his life—and for the life of Blind Tom.

CHAPTER

3

Gambler's Payoff

Sleepy Dick's two hundred dollars was in bills. He bullied a bottle of whiskey

from the reluctant Smeed, took a long drink and set it down by the little stack of currency. Six miners dropped into chairs at the table with him. Sacks of dust and nuggets clumped on the rough table top.

The first hand had been dealt when Bart McCarver, the side of his face swollen, appeared at the end of the corridor leading to the rear. Unaware of what had happened, he cried out hoarsely, "He'd worked hisself loose. He slugged me."

Sleepy Dick did not look up. He said, "That's right," grimly and went on studying his cards.

Daylight was an hour old on the second day when Sleepy Dick pulled the last of the gold toward him. He lifted his red-rimmed eyes and fastened them on the yellow-bearded Converse.

"If that's the works," he said thickly, "you're licked."

Converse looked about him at the miners who one by one had been stripped of their wealth. His bloodshot eyes drove hard at Big Bart McCarver. "You ain't gambled yet, McCarver."

"Why should I? It ain't my affair."

"No?" said Converse harshly. "The rest of the camp's cleaned out, McCarver. You made your pile out of the camp when you had your whiskey. This damn gambler's buckin' all the gold in camp—not part of it. You'll play yours an' try to break his like we done, or we'll play it for you."

Sullenly McCarver lowered his bulk into the chair opposite Sleepy Dick. "Your luck won't hold, gambler," he said curtly. "I'd as soon smash you this way as any other."

"This is the strike I was tellin' you about," croaked Sleepy Dick. "Break me now, McCarver, an' you'll be rich for the rest of your life."

McCarver lost the first hand, won the next five in succession. A vicious glow

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came into his hard black eyes. Pock Smeed crouched behind him, his cadaverous face lighting with greedy hope. For it seemed that Sleepy Dick had lost his skill, and with it his luck.

Sleepy Dick groped for the pasteboards. He had them in his hands before he became conscious that something had happened in the room.

"By Cripes," a miner ejaculated, "I'd plumb fergot about Tom!"

SLEEPY DICK turned slowly in his chair. Blind Tom! For two nights and a day he had been lying in Pock Smeed's room.

When they had helped Blind Tom into the room and put him in a chair against the wall, Sleepy Dick turned back to Big Bart McCarver. The will power which had flagged was gaining strength again. The sight of Blind Tom had tapped some well of energy buried remotely in him.

Sleepy Dick gambled then as if the courage lay in the soul of the blind man had found its way into his own. McCarver sensed the change, and fought back desperately. Slowly but inexorably the tide changed, and the gold began to flow back across the table.

Bart McCarver's face darkened like a thunderhead as he looked at the sacks behind Sleepy Dick. He shot a glance at the cringing, agonized Smeed. "Get some more!" he said.

Three times after that Pock Smeed went out like a whipped dog and came slinking back with more.

The last time, as he dumped the sacks on the table, he whispered hoarsely, "That's all! All of it, understand?"

Five minutes later it was over. In a wild rage Big Bart McCarver smashed his fist down on the cards which had lost. "You stacked 'em!" he shouted.

The yellow-bearded Converse cut him

off sternly. "Shut up, McCarver. We all seen the deal. It was honest." He turned to Sleepy Dick and said with cold bitterness, "You win, gambler. Take your dust an' get the hell out of here. Some time I'll see you again. When I do, I'm killin' you."

Sleepy Dick got up slowly, bracing himself against the table. "Wait a minute," he said. "I don't give a damn about the gold. Like I told McCarver, I didn't come up here to gamble."

"What's more, I ain't a cache robber. The skunk that done that job is here, an' I aim to point him out to you. All of you seen the gamblin' that was done today. You seen the dust that was used. I'm askin' you to figger out where it come from. I mean the dust that Pock Smeed brought in for McCarver to gamble with!"

Pock Smeed's hands were fumbling at his throat. "We—we made it—selling whiskey," he gasped.

Sleepy Dick was breathing hard. "Take your time, boys. Figger it out. I kept McCarver's sacks separate as I won 'em. Ten of 'em Smeed brought in. That's more'n three times what he could have made sellin' whiskey. Part of it maybe was his. The rest of it come out of your caches. Them caches that was robbed!"

Bart McCarver swung up one of the heavy chairs in his hairy hands. He roared, "If I'd knowed where it come from I'd never have touched it! So Smeed done it, did he? Damn his double-crossin'—" He brought the chair down with the full swing of his arms.

The chair came down again, better aimed this time. The name of Bart McCarver was the last word Pock Smeed ever uttered.

Too exhausted to move now that the crisis had come, Sleepy Dick could only stare blankly at the blur of movement before his eyes. It was Converse who

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snatched the pistol from his waistband, cried, "Drop it, McCarver!"

But Big Bart McCarver knew only too well what his fate would be. Snarling, he hurled what was left of the chair at Converse, leaped for the door. Converse had dodged and then steadied himself. The gun in his hand splashed flame.

McCarver pitched down and rolled over. Converse walked to him carefully, but there was no need for caution.

He walked slowly back, and stopped in front of Sleepy Dick. "Gambler, I reckon there's a lot I ought to say, but I ain't good at talkin'. Why you done it, I don't know, but you did. I'd be mighty proud, gambler, to shake hands."

While Sleepy Dick's hand was still in his, he added almost as an afterthought, "That gold. You won it. It's yours."

Sleepy Dick shook his head. "There's a blind man who deserves it more."

TWO days later Blind Tom was lying in the bunk in Sleepy Dick's cabin.

The gambler brought the soup he had been cooking, and sat down. "You won't need to be worryin' about money ever again, Tom."

"You know, Dick, I kind of hate to take that gold. They worked for it."

"The boys won't have it no other way, Tom—after what happened."

Neither man spoke for a time. Then it was Sleepy Dick's voice, curiously subdued: "You can leave the camps now, Tom. Go some place where your money'll let you live like you ought to."

"I been thinkin' about that," the blind man answered. "But I ain't leavin'." Though he could not see, he turned his head toward the gambler. "I been wantin' to tell you about this gent I'm lookin' for . . . He was my best friend. Nine years ago, it was, that I seen him last. Both of us had cattle outfits in Texas, an' we worked together like the wheels in

a watch, till sheep come into the country. We hadn't protected ourselves like we should have, an' there was money behind the woolies. They cramped us till there was only room for one outfit instead of two. We was both damn fools. Instead of fightin' the sheep, we fought each other. 'Fore we knowed it the thing had come to guns."

The blind man lifted his hand and it touched the scar between his eyes. "The slug he threw hit me here. We knowed what fools we'd been then. An' there was a time after that that I wished it'd been him instead of me—my bein' blind hit him so hard. I reckon he'd have put his own eyes out if it would have helped me. But there was nothin' he could do. I was blind, an' that was the end of it. Well, when he couldn't stand it no longer, he left the country—after he'd put everything he owned in my name. All he took was the clothes he was wearin'."

"What happened to the ranch?" asked Sleepy Dick huskily.

"A year ago the sheep took it. I'd stayed there, tryin' to hold on, thinkin' this feller would come back. When it was all over, I hit out for the mines, north-west. I'd heard this feller was aimin' to hit for the gold country. I wasn't follerin' him, understand, because the ranch was gone. I wanted to tell him that it didn't matter any more—my bein' blind.

"He was the kind of a man," said Blind Tom, "that'd risk his life gettin' into a snowbound gold camp if he thought a bind man, his friend, was there."

It was a long time before Sleepy Dick spoke. His eyes were closed, and the hard muscles of his face were bunched. "I knowed a Dick Shelby, a long time ago. He died, Tom. Me—I'm just a gambler."

Blind Tom understood, and a smile now softened his thin, pinched face. "He was the best friend I ever had," he said.

THE END

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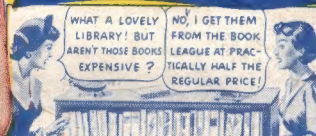
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